Reading Claude Cahun’s *Disavowals*
Jennifer L. Shaw
READING CLAUDE CAHUN’S _Disavowals_  

The first monograph on a Surrealist cult classic, _Reading Claude Cahun’s Disavowals_ offers a comprehensive account of Cahun’s most important published work, _Aveux non avenus (Disavowals)_ , 1930. Jennifer L. Shaw provides an encompassing interpretation of this groundbreaking work, paying careful attention to the complex interrelationship between the photomontages and writings of _Aveux non avenus_.

This study argues that the texts and images of _Aveux non avenus_ not only explore Cahun’s own subjectivity, they formulate a trenchant social and cultural critique. Shaw explores how Cahun’s work both calls into question the dominant culture of interwar France—with its traditional gender roles, religious conservatism, and pronatalism—and takes to task the era’s artistic avant-garde and in particular its models of desire. This volume cuts across the disciplinary boundaries of interwar art studies, demonstrating how one artist’s personal exploration intervened in wider contemporary debates about the purpose of art, the role of women in French culture, and the status of homosexuality, in the aftermath of World War I.

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DISAVOWALS

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Introduction: Exist Otherwise

Sweet, nevertheless … the moment when our two heads leaned together over a photograph (ah! How our hair would meld indistinguishably). Portrait of one or the other, our two narcissisms drowning there it was the impossible realized in a magic mirror. The exchange, the superimposition, the fusion of desires … Postcriptum: At present I exist otherwise.

Claude Cahun, *Disavowals*, 1930

Claude Cahun wanted to make people think, even exist, *otherwise*. She wanted a total revolution that would overturn received ideas about gender, sexuality, creativity and love. And the work she hoped would do this, the work she considered her most important statement, was *Aveux non avenus* (“Avowals null and void,” or, as it was titled in the first English translation, *Disavowals*) (Figure 0.1). Written and illustrated in the 1920s and published in 1930, *Disavowals* was Cahun’s manifesto. Cahun described her intentions in a letter to her close friend Paul Levy: she sought “to force [her] contemporaries out of their sanctimonious conformism, out of their complacency.” It is clear that Cahun wanted her readers to understand *Disavowals* even if that understanding was hard won, for she conceived the text as transformational. And although Cahun wrote to her contemporaries, engaging with the specifics of the interwar period and often with reference to the cultural context of her own place and time, her texts and images can, I want to argue, be transformational for us too. *Aveux non avenus* is one of the most important avant-garde works produced in France between the wars. It should hold its place alongside André Breton’s *Nadja* and *Amour fou*, and Max Ernst’s *La femme cent têtes*. And my aim is to make its rich and complicated arguments understandable and thus make its significance clear.

In *Disavowals* Cahun asks her readers to rethink social conventions of the 1920s, as well as contemporary assumptions about art. She searches for new ways to redefine relationships between self and other, masculine and feminine, art and the everyday, the ideal and the particular. We see this in the book’s imagery: androgynous faces, masks, bodies broken up and reconstructed in monstrous ways are incorporated in both the photomontages and the texts with eyes and mirrored reflections. Seams are left visible in the images and the texts often purposefully undermine their own claims. They question themselves and the reader. Cahun’s theme is crossing boundaries—gender-bending, cross-
dressing, questioning sexuality and self, rearranging family and romantic roles. Cahun experiments with her own individual circumstance to explore wider social structures. She invents new and striking representational strategies to explore issues related to what we would now call the performativity of self and gender, the questioning of sexualities and subjectivities, and the rethinking of narcissism. When Cahun was exploring these issues in the early twentieth century she was pushing far beyond conventional inquiries about self, gender and sexuality. The theoretical vocabulary of performativity and subjectivity with which we are now familiar had yet to be developed. Yet the questions she asked pointed towards future inquiries. The issues raised by Disavowals presage many of the questions

0.1 Claude Cahun, Aveux non avenus (front cover), 1930.
we grapple with today. Thus the book not only addresses some of the most pressing social and aesthetic issues of the interwar period; it also visionary. In the twenty-first century we are still dismantling and reconstructing these very same issues. My aim here is twofold. I want to set *Disavowals* into its historical context so that the importance and poignancy of its explorations become clear; but I also want to allow the reader who engages with the demanding and poignant questions raised by *Disavowals* to rethink ideas about sexuality, subjectivity, art and love in our current moment as well.

One of Cahun’s central aims in *Aveux non avenus* is to reconceptualize subjectivity and in doing so to rethink relationships between self and other. She sees visual art and writing as vehicles for this project. In the epigraph with which I began, Cahun imagines the possibility of rewriting the relationships between self and other. It describes a reconceptualization of narcissism. Cahun’s description evokes a transition from discrete “narcissisms” to something quite different. Narcissism ceases to be a pejorative. “Exchange,” “superimposition,” “fusion”—Cahun uses these terms to imagine new forms of intersubjectivity. In its evocation of collaborative desire, this passage, which is drawn from the first chapter of *Disavowals*, is an early indication of one of the book’s major themes—a theme that cuts across all the chapters and develops in the interstices of the text. The creative process imagined in this passage is not a product of an artist’s singular self-examination and self-expression, but rather emerges out of narcissism’s drowning. In this sense, the book, like many contemporary Dada and Surrealist texts, presages what Roland Barthes would ultimately call the “death of the author.” But this evocation of “exchange,” “superimposition” and “fusing” suggests that the vision evoked in the passage is also an allegory for the structure of the work itself. For the book offers no straightforward narrative that can be linked to a single author but is instead made up of multiple texts, with multiple voices, each with a different form of address.

Each of the book’s ten chapters is composed of a collage of texts written over the period 1919–29. Some of the texts—letters and diary entries—are dated and appear to fall in chronological order. Between them, however, the writing takes a variety of forms and follows no clear trajectory. On the evidence of the table of contents (Figure 0.2), each chapter purports to treat an aspect of the self. The titles invoke psychological states and situations out of which the self is fashioned: fear, self-love, sex, lying, self-pride. We are thus teased with the notion that the book follows the development of a self over a period of years. However, the chapters are made up of a montage of disparate works purposefully drawn together: dialogues, dream narratives, poems, aphorisms, fables, letters and détournements. Intimate letters, which appear to have been written for private use, are brought together with texts that Cahun had previously published in major French literary journals such as the *Mercure de France* and *Le Disque Vert*. While it was common for writers to publish work serially and then later collect it into a single work or an anthology of writings, Cahun’s *Disavowals* is patently not such a collection. The previously published excerpts of text are not noted as such, and they are integrated in such a way as to be “hidden” among the many other writings of the book.

Ten photomontages accompany the text—each reproduced in photolithographic form. These photomontages are the culmination of a photographic process that Claude Cahun and her stepsister, lover and life partner, Marcel Moore, engaged
in throughout the 1920s. The texts and images that constitute the book echo and evoke one another. They are oblique, allegorical and complicated, but they are also beautiful and moving. *Aveux non avenus* does not tell a story but asks the reader for exchange, takes her on a journey, unsettles assumptions along the way. The texts are almost never straightforward. They often negate the very terms they have set, asking readers to rethink their assumptions rather than reinforcing them. *Disavowals* is difficult, yes, but also witty, ironic, poetic and profound.

But if the “exchanges” and “superimpositions” of the book take place within its images and pages, they also extend beyond them. The book insistently addresses
its own cultural context. We read dialogues in which the turn-of-the-century aesthete addresses the conventional 1920s man and woman. We read poems in prose that engage with a pantheon of writers, from the dialogues of the ancient Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata, to Victor Hugo, Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde and André Gide. We read nightmares that evoke the horrors of the First World War. The psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and the sexology of Havelock Ellis play central roles in Cahun’s panoply of references. Witty dialogues evoke the popular culture and advertising of 1920s France. Poems, fables and passages rewrite classicism, engaging with the conservative culture of the rappel à l’ordre, traditional models of art and the cultures of aestheticism to which many early twentieth-century homosexual writers were drawn. Both the images and texts often require the reader to think outside of them, alluding to historical events, cultural paradigms, literary issues, political problems, gendered stereotypes, cultural icons, artistic experiments and sexual mores. The work is so complex, so historically embedded, and so intertextual that understanding its full meaning requires the knowledge of a context now lost to most twenty-first-century readers. Thus, while individual passages from Disavowals are often quoted in treatments of Cahun, the overarching themes and arguments of Disavowals have been little discussed in the literature. Yet, as a result, much of the richness and complexity of the writings and images that appear in Disavowals has yet to be understood. I wish to open a window on to the often beautiful and profound imagery and arguments of Cahun’s book.

For a long time Cahun’s book was available in the United States only in the special collections of a few libraries. In 2002, Cahun expert and biographer François Leperlier published a collected volume of Cahun’s writings, making Disavowals more widely available to readers of French.6 Finally, in 2008, an English translation appeared.7 Writing in the New York Times in December 2008, the critic Holland Cotter included Disavowals in his guide to “The Best Art Architecture and Design Books” of 2008. Disavowals, he said, would appeal to any “art lover for whom pictures and words have equal weight.” Cotter continued, “part memoir, part theoretical tract, part queer manifesto, Disavowals: or Cancelled Confessions by the French photographer and performance artist Claude Cahun, born Lucy Schwob (1894–1964), is making a first-time appearance in English in a paperback edition peppered with photomontages. It’s an event.”8 However, even once it became physically available to readers of both French and English, Cahun’s book was not really accessible. For as the author of one of the most recent books on Cahun’s photographs points out, Cahun’s “literary works” are “at times exceedingly difficult to understand.9

In Reading Claude Cahun’s Disavowals, I will analyze the images and texts of Disavowals in a way that promotes both the understanding and appreciation of the work. This book attempts to draw out some of these arguments and themes, and trace them as they develop throughout the texts and photomontages. In it, I offer one, sometimes idiosyncratic, reading of Claude Cahun’s Disavowals. My hope is that this study can be read alongside Cahun’s text as a sort of guidebook that will make some sense of, and give some context to, a difficult but rewarding work. All the while, I realize the irony of this enterprise. Cahun did not intend Disavowals to be straightforward or didactic; she intended that her readers think for themselves and engage in unraveling the many references, plays on words, allusions and
language games in which she delighted. There is a sense in which, by explicating the text and images, I do some of the reader’s work for her, and thus, paradoxically, my project goes against Cahun’s very aim. I make no claim to give a definitive reading of the texts’ and photomontages’ meanings. Nor do I believe that I have given, or even could give, an exhaustive account of the many contexts it addresses. I offer the beginning of an analysis that deepens and adds to the contexts that are usually evoked with relationships to Cahun: Surrealism and postmodernism.

Cahun Today

In her own day, Cahun’s work was known and appreciated by only a few like-minded souls and fellow travelers. Today, however, her works seems relevant to a whole generation of artists, scholars and students. In late twentieth-century scholarly circles, Cahun (sometimes erroneously identified as a man) initially appeared as a figure at the margins of the Surrealist movement. Eventually, due to the scholarship of François Leperlier, her identity and work made their way into the public sphere. Cahun entered the pantheon of Surrealism as one of several forgotten woman artists, but because she was “rediscovered” at precisely the same moment when contemporary artists and scholars were exploring the politics of identity, her work also took on a different kind of importance. Claude Cahun became something of a cult figure—a heroine for art historians and critics with allegiances to postmodernism, feminism and queer theory. Cahun self-consciously played with notions of identity and gender, presenting herself as “other”—through dress, hairstyle and makeup. Friend to the lesbian “women of the Left Bank,” to the literary luminaries of mainstream Paris, Surrealist fellow traveler and participant in avant-garde theater, and in Breton’s words, “one of the most curious spirits of our time,” Cahun traversed literary and artistic worlds from center to margin and back again. It was almost uncanny for such a figure to have been rediscovered in the late twentieth century. If Cahun had not existed, we would have had to invent her. In fact, there is a sense in which we already have.

The dominant interpretations of Cahun’s photographs and photomontages fit almost too neatly with contemporary theory. In the mid-1980s the art historian Hal Foster referred to Cahun as “Cindy Sherman avant la lettre.” The photomontage and text that constitute the final plate of *Disavowals* demonstrates why Foster described her this way: “Behind this mask another mask, I will never finish lifting up all these faces” the inscription reads (see Figure 5.10). A repeating sequence of faces atop a neck displaces the head in the lower center. Which of these, the montage seems to ask, is the “real” Cahun? What model of identity is being presented here? Joan Riviere’s “masquerade” and Judith Butler’s notion of the “performative” immediately come to mind. These concepts—the “masquerade” and the “performative” their recent incarnations—have most often been used to inform discussions of Cahun. It is of course the case that the notion of “femininity as masquerade” derives from the very moment when Cahun published *Aveux non avenus* and that it is integrally linked to the question of the new woman—the ambitious intellectual woman in particular—who was forced to perform her own hyperfemininity in order to avoid the recriminations that might ensue as a
result of her usurpation of male prerogatives. Cahun’s work was meant to call into question dominant conceptions of subjectivity and prescribed social roles, so it is not surprising that interpreters of Cahun have viewed her work via current versions of feminist and queer theory. However, I believe that while such an approach is valuable, it does not go far enough. If we end our analysis by pointing out the ways in which Cahun’s and Moore’s photographs seem to prefigure our own postmodern interests, we lose sight of the specific aims of the project. We lose sight, that is, of its true radicality and its richness. If Cahun’s *Disavowals* is concerned with the decentered subject, it will be important to understand what was at stake in such a concern in the 1920s, when the book was produced.

**Disavowals as (Anti)-Autobiography?**

In my interpretation, one of the defining features of Cahun’s book is that although it is formally very complex, it has logic that can be teased out; I believe that Cahun wanted her readers ultimately to be able to follow her arguments. Leperlier describes this well in his excellent afterword to the English translation of *Aveux non avenus*: “This ‘self-centered’ book, which trumpets its narcissism, its egotism, its extreme individualism, also longs to engage with others: but those others have to undertake a full part in the process, play the game of ‘for and against’, of ‘punch ball and boxer’ as Cahun puts it, on their own account.” Thus Leperlier aptly calls attention to the contradictory nature of the book, the difficulty that readers must undergo in playing the game of reading it, and also alludes to the ways the book moves beyond solipsistic self-exploration and toward engaging with social issues. If, for example, we are to describe Cahun’s literary strategy as negation, what does this negation add up to in critical, cultural terms? In order to answer that, we need to move beyond the fact of negation as a strategy, toward some more concrete ways that this negation engages with the issues and works that mattered most to Cahun.

*Disavowals* has most often been described as a self-cancelling “autobiography.” Indeed, it is common to read that *Disavowals* follows in the tradition of confessional literature exemplified in France by François-René de Chateaubriand and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Furthermore, it is often pointed out that, unlike the more traditional self-questioning of confessional writing, the very form of Cahun’s work, with its variety of voices and poetic negations, leads not to the discovery of a self but rather the self’s unraveling. However, I would argue that Cahun’s book is never merely about unraveling and negation. It is, rather, about reimagining the self in a process without closure, on a journey undertaken not only by Cahun, but also by her readers. While this characterization of *Disavowals* as anti-autobiography is true in part, it is not an adequate description. For *Disavowals* is a book that, to borrow a phrase from Cahun herself, “lend[s] [itself] to the world.” Cahun’s *Disavowals* is a palimpsest that gives us a new perspective on interwar debates about art, classicism, gender and sexuality. More important, it is also a manifesto with its own arguments. When Cahun appears to explore or call into question her own subjectivity, it is often for the purpose of commenting upon wide-ranging social, political, psychological or aesthetic issues. We will
never understand the true importance of Cahun's work for our own moment until we have fully engaged with both the literary and the visual interventions Cahun made into her own moment.19

**Before Aveux non avenus**

Claude Cahun was born to the Schwob family, a prominent Jewish family in Nantes in 1894, and the named Lucy Renée Mathilde.20 She was, from the beginning, well connected to the French literary world. Her father, Maurice, published a leading Republican newspaper, *Le Phare de la Loire*, as well as smaller literary journals. Her uncle Marcel was a well-respected Symbolist poet, friend and literary comrade of figures such as André Gide, Oscar Wilde and Remy de Gourmont; he was also a founder of the prominent Parisian literary journal, the *Mercure de France*. At about the age of 19, Lucy began to contribute to the family journals.21

The family took education seriously. In 1906, Lucy Schwob was sent to school in England for two years, partly to avoid the anti-Semitic climate that was then current in France. She became relatively fluent in English, which must have been enhanced by her family’s summer trips to Isle of Jersey, to which she would relocate later in life to escape the Nazi threat in Paris. Cahun’s writings often include English-language puns, jokes and references. Upon her return to France, Cahun enrolled in a prestigious lycée where she met Suzanne Malherbe, who would later take the pen name Marcel Moore. After the lycée she enrolled for a time at the Sorbonne.

Cahun’s education was further enriched in unconventional ways. Her paternal grandmother, Mathilde Cahun, was the closest thing she had to a maternal figure.
Cahun’s own mother suffered from mental illness and was institutionalized during much her childhood. For Cahun’s benefit and her own, Mathilde, who suffered from cataracts, required her only granddaughter to read aloud from classical literature and mythology. When, in her early twenties, Lucy Schwob adopted the pseudonym Claude Cahun, she paid homage to her grandmother by taking her last name (Cahun) and evoking her family legacy. Cahun’s education was further enhanced by her own exploration of her family’s literary legacy. Cahun had access to the considerable private library associated with *Le Phare de la Loire*, which included not only work by her uncle Marcel and his cohort, but many Symbolist first editions. Unlike most girls growing up in France at the turn of the century, Lucy was encouraged in these pursuits. As a result, from an early age she saw herself as a serious intellectual.

The lifelong partnership of Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe—Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore (Figure 0.3)—began at the lycée. Two years older than Lucy, Suzanne was born in July 1892. Even before the girls met at lycée in 1909, the families, both prominent members of the cultural elite of Nantes, were already acquainted. Lucy’s father was close enough to Suzanne’s father to consult him privately about family medical matters, including concerns about Lucy’s mental and physical well-being and his worries that their daughters’ intimacy might exceed the bounds of conventional friendship. Dr. Malherbe seems to have advised Marcel Schwob that, for the sake of Lucy’s health, they should allow the relationship to develop. Thus the girls’ intimacy was sanctioned by their fathers and Suzanne was given permission to “heal” Lucy. Their relationship flourished, and they began living together in their own apartment in Nantes. During this same period, Lucy’s father also became close friends with Suzanne’s mother, Marie-Eugénie Malherbe. When Suzanne’s father died in 1915, the relationship intensified, and in 1917, Suzanne’s mother married Lucy’s father. Lucy and Suzanne were now stepsisters. Throughout their lives, this relationship as sisters had both symbolic and social implications. As Tirza True Latimer observes: “This event undoubtedly facilitated the
Le Croisic, 1913. — Las des rumeurs de Paris, je viens me reposer au Croisic.
Après un voyage, si court soit-il, de l’eau chaude, un lit frais, vous sont choses précieuses. Je n’en use, et la fenêtre ouverte, je respire l’air pur; je rêve, et j’attends le sommeil. Ma tête, emplie des bruits de la cité, va trouver au port de pêche un calme délicieux.
Dieu! que les oiseaux de mer sont bavards! et les marins, c’est effrayant!
Dépayssé, jamais je n’ai si mal dormi.
Rome. Auguste. — Pollion m'invite à Rome ; hélas ! il me faut te quitter, à Nantoue !

Après un voyage, si court soi-dit, de l'eau chaude, un lit frais, vous sont choses précieuses. J'en use. Puis, la fenêtre bien close, je respire un air impur, tout parfumé. Je rêve à ma vie nouvelle, et je crains l'insomnie. Ma tête, accoutumée au culin de nos champs, résonnera, douloureuse, à la fièvre bruyante de la reine du monde.

Que ces rideaux de soleil sont épais ! J'entends à peine un murmure assourdi qui me berc... Dépaysé, jamais je n'ai si bien dormi.
couple’s joint exploits to some extent, providing cover for their intimacy, but it also reinforced the institutional framework of the nuclear family—a framework at once legitimating and constraining.”

From 1913 to 1918, Lucy Schwob contributed articles on fashion, sports and cultural life to *Le Phare de la Loire*, which also published illustrations and graphics by Suzanne Malherbe (Figure 0.4). Lucy’s first serious literary publication, “Vues et visions,” was initially published serially under the pseudonym “Claude Courlis” in the *Mercure de France* in 1913 and later issued as a book written by Claude Cahun and illustrated by Marcel Moore in 1919 (Figure 0.5). This, the first public collaboration between Lucy/Cahun and Suzanne/Moore, drew heavily on the literary and artistic experiments in aestheticism undertaken by Symbolist poets such as Paul Verlaine or Wilde and artists such as Aubrey Beardsley. Cahun and Moore were particularly drawn to those writers and artists who positioned the ancient world as a setting in which homosexuality was accepted and used it as a setting for their writings and works. The evocation of Symbolism and Aestheticism as models for homophile reconstructions of antiquity in *Vues et visions* would be a prelude to many of the themes taken up later in *Disavowals.* The publication of *Vues et visions* also marked the explicit appearance of the pseudonymous Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore as collaborators. In the late teens, Moore pursued her artistic education at the École des Beaux-Arts in Nantes, while Cahun worked toward a literary degree at the Sorbonne.

In the 1920s Cahun and Moore moved to Paris (Figure 0.6). During the 1920s and 1930s Cahun’s writings appeared in major literary journals (including the *Mercure de France*, *Philosophies* and *Le Disque Vert*). Many of the texts she published during this period would be integrated, in whole or in part, and sometimes with revisions, into *Aveux non avenus*. This period in the 1920s was extremely productive for both women. Their family legacy gave them entry into the highest echelons of the literary world, but it also made them secure enough to seek out the margins of Parisian culture. From their earliest days in Paris, Cahun and Moore frequented Sylvia Beach’s Shakespeare and Company as well as the lending library and salons of Adrienne Monnier’s Maison des Amis des Livres.

Closely connected with the “women of the left Bank,” Cahun and Moore were also involved in some of the most radical experiments in Parisian theater. Both were members of Pierre Albert Birot’s avant-garde theater group Le Plateau. Many of the photographs Cahun and Moore constructed for *Disavowals* depict Cahun in costume for Birot’s theatrical productions (Figure’s 0.7, 0.8). In addition to their literary and theatrical pursuits, Cahun and Moore seem to have closely followed the Parisian artistic avant-garde. Gertrude Stein reports having met Cahun, “the niece of Marcel Schwob,” and records Cahun attending Nathalie Barney’s Salons. Cahun and Moore’s apartment at 70 bis rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs would eventually become a meeting point of its own. Leperlier describes it as a “microcosm” that drew together “a whole intellectual and artistic generation” including “Pierre Albert-Birot, Georges Bataille, Sylvia Beach, André Breton, … Jane Heap, Jacques Lacan, Jacqueline Lamba, … Jacques Lipchitz … Henri Michaux, Marguerite Moreno, Pierre Morhange, … Chana Orloff, Benjamin Peret, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Jean Ryeul, Tristan Tzara, Jacques Viot, etc.”
Cahun’s prominent position in Parisian culture in the 1920s and 1930s is demonstrated by an examination of her address book, which includes names, addresses and telephone numbers of the most important figures of her time. In it, a diverse pantheon of the brilliant and famous from different intellectual and social worlds share pages. We find Jacques Lacan and sexologist Havelock Ellis side by side with famous writers such as Gide, Paul Valéry, Paul Fort, Henri Michaux and Paul Éluard. Dadaist Tristan Tzara and Surrealists André Breton, Georges Bataille, Salvador Dali, René Crevel, Robert Desnos, Roger Caillois, Max Ernst and Louis Aragon rub shoulders with the women of the Left Bank: Sylvia Beach, Natalie Barney, Adrienne Monnier and Gertrude Stein. In her life and in her work, Cahun traversed the boundaries between these different
intellectual circles. And while in her personal life she may have idolized particular cultural figures, in her writings she always took an intellectually rigorous view of their ideas. For example, while she was clearly influenced by Symbolism and Surrealism and held their practitioners in high esteem, she also studied them carefully enough to formulate her own critiques of certain aspects of their work. Thus we are just as likely to find critiques of psychoanalysis, Symbolism or Surrealism embedded in the texts and images of *Disavowals* as we are to see the undermining of traditional notions of classicism or gender. Indeed, the current literature about art between the
wars tends to focus either on avant-garde culture or on the post-war return to order. Because Disavowals addresses both the dominant and the avant-garde cultures of the period and engages with politics, psychology, sexology, art and literature, my account of Cahun and her work cuts across the usual disciplinary boundaries.

During this incredibly rich period in the 1920s, Cahun and Moore produced and collected many of the photographs that they would use as the raw material for the plates in Aveux non avenus. Furthermore, this was the time when Cahun began to conceive of collecting some of her previous writings (published and unpublished) into a collage and shape them into a work for public consumption. Indeed, as Tirza Latimer observes, Adrienne Monnier’s suggestion that she write a confessional memoir seems to have been a catalyst for the production of the book. In a letter to Monnier from 1926, Cahun wrote:

You have told me to write a confession because you knew only too well that this is currently the only literary task that might seem to me first and foremost realizable, where I feel at ease, permit myself a direct link, contact with the real world, with the facts ... But I believe that I have understood in what manner, in what form you envision this confession (in sum: without deceit of any sort).29

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Cahun added.30 By 1928, Cahun had assembled a manuscript, although, as we shall see, it was anything but the straightforward “confession” that Monnier had advocated.31
The Launch of *Aveux non avenus*

*Aveux non avenus* was conceived and composed over a period of a decade. It made its debut in Paris in June 1930 at the Librairie José Corti. Published in a small edition of 500 by an avant-garde publishing house known for its Dada and Surrealist books, *Disavowals* was produced as an art book and a collector’s item. Cahun and Moore kept photographs documenting the book’s launch, and these photos make clear the context in which *Disavowals* was initially presented (Figure’s 0.9, 0.10). Along the top shelf in the window, the cover of *Aveux non avenus* takes its place adjacent to the avant-garde magazine *Bifur* and Dadaist/Surrealist Max Ernst’s now famous collage novel, *La femme cent têtes* (Figure 0.11).

Cahun, the vitrine implies, is both a writer and a visual artist. She is working on the margins of Parisian culture but at the center of the avant-garde. She is experimental and takes liberties with the norm. The bookshop window highlights the visual component of *Aveux non avenus*. It puts on display not only the photolithographic plates that punctuate the book but also selected photomontages in their original form. The top shelves of the vitrine displayed the front and back covers of *Aveux non avenus*. Below, two of the original photomontages are propped up at the window’s left and right edges. At the center, on expensive paper with rough-cut edges, more of the photolithographs are laid out for display.
At the center of the window, we also see two works that are not part of *Aveux non avenus*: a large photograph of Cahun looking askance in a mirror and a drawing or collage with an exotic and theatrical design signed “Claude Cahun.” “Here is a book that is on the cutting edge of the arts and takes its place alongside those of Max Ernst,” the top shelves declare. “Here is the artist who made the work,” adds the photo of Cahun at a mirror and the signed exotic collage peopled with orientalist elements. Assembling a variety of media, displaying Cahun’s signature, and giving prominence to self-portraits, the arrangement seems to declare not just “here is the book *Aveux non avenus*” but also “here is the artist/writer who made that book: Claude Cahun.”

Indeed, in one of the photographs documenting the book’s launch (see Figure 0.11), Cahun poses alongside the window, leaning casually against the
building with one arm up, the other hand thrust into her pocket. She wears a cardigan, large bangles and an exotically patterned scarf. Her head is covered by a tight-fitting knitted cap. Her features appear harsh and androgynous. One notes, especially, the theatrical lines that take the place of natural brows, and the dark shadows that surround her eyes. Whereas the woman to her left (who is as yet unidentified), with her cropped hair, large beads and snakeskin-patterned, belted dress, evokes the new woman of the 1920s and 1930s, Cahun’s look is sui generis. She has composed herself in a manner that resonates with the images in the window display—works that, as one may glean from looking at this photograph, feature her own repeating image. The window display, with its profusion of works by and images of the artist, initially appears to rely on the notion that authorship and subjectivity are unproblematically intertwined. However, as I will show throughout this book, the text of _Aveux non avenus_ and its images offer no such transparency between artist and work.

It is unclear whether Cahun and Moore originally intended these images as works of art for public consumption. Even so, from early on the photographs defied conventional portraiture or snapshot photography. Cahun and Moore seem to have begun taking photographs together as early as 1910, with the most prolific period beginning after their move to Paris in 1920. Most of the photographs taken during this period are known to us as negatives or small contact prints. Once Cahun and Moore chose to include parts of these
photographs in the photomontages made for *Disavowals* in the late 1920s, the images took on a public meaning. Like the text of *Disavowals*, which combines letters apparently written for private purposes with writings clearly intended for public consumption, many of the photographs seem to be offered up by Cahun and Moore as emblems of the ideas they purport to represent, rather than glimpses into a private world via confession. Indeed, the photomontages combine fragments of the photographs made by Cahun and Moore with conventional portraits, snapshots, elements of mass culture (magazines, celebrity portraits) and hand-drawn additions.

Without exception, the plates feature images (or partial images) of Cahun. Images of the author are placed side by side with her writings. Were this a conventional text, the reader would expect to mine from each chapter some notion of the artist’s self that corresponds with the photomontage introducing it. However, as the title already suggests, the purpose of the book is not a straightforward revelation of cohesive subjectivity. As we read, we find that the revelations in the text—in letters or diary entries—are interspersed with self-canceling dialogues, aphorisms and other language games that warn the reader to be wary of placing too much stock in the “I” of the text as a source of truth. Perhaps even more explicit, a warning to the reader is given in the photomontages. For although these illustrations insistently repeat the image of Cahun, they transform and recombine Cahun’s face and body in a manner that problematizes any easy reading of Cahun’s self.

The frontispiece, the only plate with a signature, is signed not “Cahun,” but “Moore” (Figure 0.12) The title page of *Disavowals* describes the plates as “composed by Moore following the author’s designs,” an account that reinforces Cahun’s authorship by suggesting that Moore was merely carrying out Cahun’s artistic will. However, it is clear from the text of *Disavowals*, as well as from the photomontages and many of the individual photographs taken prior to its publication, that Cahun was exploring the idea of collaborative practice as it might offer an alternative to dominant paradigms of both artistic creativity and human subjectivity more generally. There is debate about whether Cahun and Moore collaborated on the photomontages of *Aveux non avenus*, and the extent of that collaboration. On one side, feminist scholars such as myself and Latimer support the notion that the photographic work and the photomontages were probably collaborative to at least some degree. Other scholars disagree. For example, Jennifer Mundy states that “It is known from letters that Cahun worked with Moore on the visual aspects of the book, but beyond this it is hard to say specifically how much of a role she played,” so it is “safest to accept the attribution given in the book’s frontispiece: ‘Illustrated with Heliogravures Composed by Moore after Plans [projets] Made by the Author.’ This would indicate that Cahun was the author of the original photomontages.”34 We will never know the degree to which the two artists physically collaborated in making these works. It is certain, however, that Moore was Cahun’s constant intellectual interlocutor and that, in *Disavowals*, Cahun writes about a collaborator in love and art whose reference is Moore. Rather than trying to prove any degree of collaboration, I would simply like, in this book, to draw out the theme and its significance. While I personally believe that the two must have collaborated on this project, my claims in this book are limited to the exploration of the idea of
0.12 Marcel Moore and Claude Cahun, Frontispiece to Aveux non avenus, 1930.
collaboration as it appears in the texts and images of *Disavowals*, rather than an attempt to prove that the artists physically collaborated on the production of the photomontages or the text.

The perception that *Disavowals* and all of the photographic work associated with Cahun were the product of Cahun's singular vision has been reinforced by the fact that the photomontages are still almost always attributed solely to her in catalogues and essays. Such is the power of our association of creativity and individuality. It is this same association, equally strong in Cahun's own day, that made it imperative for her work to be presented in this vitrine as the confessional text of a single author. Indeed, naming the author singularly, as does this book's title, “Reading Claude Cahun’s *Disavowals*,” reinforces this misconception. For, as we shall see, as we explore the images and texts in *Disavowals*, Cahun is never interested only in self-exploration. The projects undertaken here, though they sometimes start from letters, dreams or nightmares, are never merely personal. Instead, they take the reader on a journey in which alternate paradigms of self, desire, interpersonal relations, creativity and love are, after much struggle, proposed. To understand this journey, we must first set out the landscapes that Cahun and Moore inhabited so that we can adequately understand what is at stake in the shattering and remaking of selves and worlds imagined in *Disavowals*.

**Intertextuality, Intersubjectivity, Photomontage**

One of the themes I wish to draw out in this study is the idea that the collage form of the texts and images in *Disavowals* is not only a representational strategy but also a metaphoric form that enacts some of the main arguments of the book. Jennifer Valcke has argued that, rather than focusing on photomontage as a technique associated with particular media, we ought to think about “montage as principle,” proposing that works “constructed using the montage principle suggest a new way of seeing.” She describes “images that at times integrate text, often conjure unreal space, and always incorporate a degree of narrative breakdown” as invoking “the discontinuous and the ruptured as the talisman of the twentieth century.”

In my interpretation of the images and texts of *Disavowals*, I am interested in the ways that principles of montage allow the texts and images to formally enact some of the most important arguments of the book. One the one hand, the montages of *Disavowals* emphasize the fragmentary and the disjunctive. On the other, these fragments have an intertextual relation to one another—among texts, among images, and between texts and images. The insistence on the fragment or rejected leftover is an important theme in the book. In addition, this intertextuality of words and images parallels Cahun’s proposal in the text of intersubjectivity as a new paradigm for imagining the self and its relationships with others.

When I say that *Disavowals* is intertextual I mean two things. First, there are many places in *Disavowals* where arguments, characters or themes that were introduced in one part of the book are taken up again. For example, the meaning or resonance of a particular passage or a particular image within a montage is enhanced or shifted when one encounters it again in another part of the work.
Second, as will become apparent in the interpretations I offer, the texts and images of *Disavowals* insistently take up and address the major issues of Cahun’s time by engaging directly with work of writers, thinkers and artists of her context. Thus the book is intertextual or, to use another word, dialogical, in the sense that its full meaning comes to light only when understood along with the texts, issues or works to which it refers. These investments in dialogic intertextuality are also embodied in the technique of photomontage.

The photomontage, by its very nature, is structurally intertextual. Photomontages bring together disparate images and ask them to “speak” to one another. Each image, removed from its original context, gains meaning from its conjunction with new images and text. While the photograph, with its associated mythology of truth, was often used to affirm dominant cultural views, many members of the artistic avant-gardes in the early twentieth century turned to photomontage as a way of disrupting easy visions of the status quo. Writing in 1931 about Dada photomontage in Berlin, Raoul Haussmann, one of the medium’s pioneers, noted that the artists had managed to create “a vision-reflection that was optically and conceptually new, using structures often eccentric and clashing because of their properties as objects and their different spatial positions.”

In the same essay, Haussmann said that in addition to parodying and critiquing contemporary political realities, photomontage had also become a tool for political propaganda as well as a medium for design and advertising. This description refers to the experiments with photomontage by László Moholy-Nagy in the Bauhaus and Alexander Rodchenko and Gustav Klucis in the context of Soviet Constructivism.

However, while each of these practices has some relation to the work of Cahun by virtue of the fact that all of them recombine photographic images in one way or another, there are important distinctions to be drawn between the work in *Disavowals* and the photomontages of Dada, Bauhaus and Constructivist artists. (This requires some rather broad generalizations about avant-garde photomontage, for which I ask the reader’s indulgence.) First, in contrast to the artists of Berlin Dada, who generally used found images from the mass media, most of the images in Cahun’s photomontages are portraits of Cahun (often made collaboratively by Cahun and Moore). Cahun sometimes incorporated elements from the mass media, but these are the exception rather than the rule. Second, like the montages of Hannah Hoch, and unlike the photomontages of Rodchenko or Klucis, the works in *Disavowals* always show their seams. If they construct a new reality, it always hangs together in a fragile way, and this awkward emphasis on the fragment is very important to their meanings. Finally, as in the text, the references to context often require a certain amount of work to understand. This stands in great contrast to the overtly political and easily understandable montages made by John Heartfield to critique Hitler’s rising regime or by Klucis to promote the Soviet state.

The technique Cahun and Moore used was unique. It appears to draw on the kinds of disjunctive strategies used in 1919–20 by Hoch and Haussmann, or the more experimental work of Rodchenko, but substitutes self-made photographs for images found in the mass media.

In concept and theme, Cahun and Moore seem to be drawing above all else on Surrealist uses of photography and montage. Indeed, I would argue that, in their insistence on juxtapositions that evoke gender, sexuality and psychology,
the photomontages of *Disavowals* have the most in common with the collage works of Max Ernst (a dozen of which were exhibited at the Sans Pareil gallery in 1921) and Breton’s photographically illustrated texts. Cahun is likely to have seen the Ernst collages when they were first exhibited, and she owned copies of Breton’s *Nadja* and Ernst’s montage novels. She published *Disavowals* with the same press that published works by Ernst and was close friends with Ernst’s dealer, Jacques Viot. The critiques of conventional paradigms of gender, creativity and love in *Disavowals* are in dialogue with Breton. From my perspective, these works by Breton and Ernst, which I will discuss below, form an important context for understanding the photomontages of *Disavowals* despite the fact that their authors are not engaging in exactly the same kind of visual representation as Cahun and Moore.

The artistic methods of photomontage employed in *Disavowals* mirror the themes explored in the book. Confusing fragments are incorporated into the photomontages, fragments that appear to be wrested from a photographic whole and incorporated into a visual context in which they remain legibly incomplete images. In addition, it is extremely important to their meanings that the photos and montages are (or are represented as) collaborations between Cahun and Moore. As I will demonstrate in my interpretation of *Disavowals*, Cahun plays with the notions of narcissism, egoism and individual artistic genius, and proposes alternatives such as “exchange,” “superimposition” and “fusing” as paradigms for self, art and love. Along with this, I would argue that Cahun asks the reader/viewer who follows her text to abandon what I will call, for lack of a better term, “the ideal” altogether. She asks her reader to embrace, instead, the “leftover” and the partial as means of understanding the book and its message of aesthetic and personal liberation. She does so in the face of a culture that celebrates aesthetic, sexual and personal ideals of artistic autonomy, heterosexuality and wholeness that she could not and would never want to fulfill.

A closer interpretation of the whole of *Disavowals* will not only give us insight into the profound arguments about subjectivity Cahun puts forth; it will also aid us in tracing a genealogy of debates about gender, sexuality, art and subjectivity that are still with us today. In addition, looking at *Disavowals* allows us to reevaluate photography’s status as a textual medium in the interwar period and to understand why photography has become *the* medium for (and Cahun the foremother of) feminist/postmodern practice—a medium that the critics and artists who write about and celebrate Cahun all seem deeply invested in. It will help us to understand both Cahun’s day, and our own, the better.

**Dada and Surrealism**

Cahun and Moore had been interested in Dada from the time they arrived in Paris. They subscribed to the journal *Littérature* from its inception, and in 1921 Cahun had published the Dada-inspired poem “Chanson sauvage” in the *Mercure de France*. She was closely connected to the editor of the *Journal Littéraire*, an eclectic magazine that accommodated both more traditional and Surrealist writers, and which reported on Dada events such as the “réunions
Cocteau–Picabia.\textsuperscript{40} During this period, Cahun and Moore took full advantage of the avant-garde cultural life of Paris. According to Leperlier, Cahun “wanted to explore all kinds of literature, see theatre, cinema, make contacts, enlarge her circle of contacts.”\textsuperscript{41} Jacques Viot, a writer and art broker who worked with Joan Miró, Max Ernst and Jean Arp, and contributed to Surrealist journals, was a close family friend who introduced Cahun and Moore around Paris.\textsuperscript{42} Cahun’s Dada and Surrealist sympathies were already well established in the 1920s. We know that Cahun collected Dada and Surrealist books and subscribed to all the major avant-garde journals.\textsuperscript{43} Her family’s friendship with Viot facilitated her introduction to several literary figures, including Henri Michaux and René Crevel (both of whom would become friends) and her acquaintance with others (including Breton), long before she was officially associated with Surrealism.\textsuperscript{44} In 1925 Michaux read some of Cahun’s \textit{Héroïnes} essays in Viot’s apartment before they were published and was so impressed that he wrote to Cahun, beginning a long friendship.\textsuperscript{45} It was through these connections that Cahun would eventually meet Breton and associate more closely with the Surrealist groups that arose around Breton and Bataille in the early 1930s just after the publication of \textit{Disavowals} (Figure 0.13). Cahun’s association with Breton and his then wife, the painter Jacqueline Lamba, is represented in Cahun’s photograph of the two of them (Figure 0.14). With the publication of \textit{Disavowals}, Cahun would become an active member of the Surrealist movement, publishing in Surrealist journals such
as Minotaur and constructing objects for Surrealist exhibitions. In addition, she, like many Surrealists, would become active in anti-fascist politics, composing and signing political tracts published by the Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires, and along with Breton and Bataille she participated in the anti-fascist organization Contre-Attaque. In 1936, Cahun’s work was featured in the Exhibition of Surrealist Objects at the Galerie Charles Ratton in Paris (Figure’s 0.15, 0.16) and her essay “Prenez garde aux objets domestiques” was published in Cahiers d’Art in conjunction with the exhibition.

0.14 Claude Cahun, Untitled (Andre Breton and Jacqueline Lamba), 1935.
Disavowals was finished just a year after the publication of Breton’s famous Surrealist book Nadja.\textsuperscript{46} Since Breton’s text is also illustrated with photographs, it is tempting to compare the two. Both deal with the issues of subjectivity and love. But whereas Breton’s narrative is continuous and clearly told from a stable, first-person position, Cahun’s book is a collage of texts with a multiplicity of literary forms written from many points of view. Breton’s illustrations are straight photographs taken by Man Ray and other Surrealist photographers, depicting the members of Breton’s intellectual circle or evocative scenes of the city of Paris directly connected to his text. The photographs are set within the manuscript in logical progression. The images in Disavowals are not photographs, but photomontages by Moore and Cahun, and they communicate by very different means. The juxtapositions within the photomontages resonate with the writings of Disavowals. Each montage sets the stage for the chapter that follows. Some
connections can be drawn between the images and texts that immediately follow, but the imagery in a particular montage is often also connected to other portions of the book. When resonances exist between image and text they are far from straightforward; what is more, there is an intertextual relationship between the photomontages themselves, as photographic elements from one are reused in another. In terms of visual structure, the photomontages in *Disavowals* are more closely connected to Ernst’s collage novels, where repeated figures and themes recur, than they are to Breton’s illustrations in *Nadja*. However, Cahun’s photomontages with their self-portraits and visible seams are unlike Ernst’s collage novels, which are composed of fragments taken from old-fashioned engravings seamlessly incorporated together.

The superimposition of disparate elements, the multiple exposures, the use of mirrors and mirrored images that appear in Cahun and Moore’s photomontages are sometimes even closer to the Dada and Surrealist films of René Clair or Man Ray than to experimental photomontages of the early 1920s. The critic and writer Pierre Mac Orlan, who wrote the preface to *Disavowals*, recognized its filmic affinities, describing the book as an “adventure” “presented to us in a series of cinematic glimpses.” Cahun’s own introduction to *Disavowals*, moreover, begins with a filmic allusion: “The invisible adventure. The lens tracks the eyes, the mouth ... I’ll trace the wake of vessels in the air, the pathway over the waters, the pupil’s mirage.” At the heart of these passages is a description of a refusal to allow the imagery to be still, to be fully captured, and thus have all the meaning definitively wrung out of it. Cahun and Orlan both use the motion-picture camera as a metaphor for this shifting, allusive adventure that Cahun offers her readers. In this sense, as I shall discuss in Chapter 5, Cahun’s work has a strong affinity with avant-garde cinema of the 1920s.

The Surrealists were particularly interested in the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud. Cahun, like others, used it as a weapon against conventionality and repression. Indeed, Cahun’s interest in psychology appears to have extended beyond the Surrealists and their obsession with Freud to embrace other theoreticians as well. And it was not merely a product of her exposure to Surrealism. Her personal history inspired a desire to explore the psychology of self well before that. Cahun’s mother had been institutionalized for mental illness when Cahun was a girl, and she lived in fear of herself becoming ill. Cahun’s *Disavowals* plays with the confessional paradigm that, as Foucault discussed in the *History of Sexuality*, became central to the techniques of modern psychology and sexology. The references to Freud in Cahun’s writings of the 1920s and 1930s make it clear that she took the investigation of Freud’s psychological theory seriously. Furthermore, Cahun’s position as a feminist and a lesbian led her to make extensive study of sexological literature. Indeed, as Tirza True Latimer suggests, “The invocation of confession in the title of *Aveux non avenus* places this book in dialogue with some of the era’s most significant writings on gender and sexuality, including the theories of both Freud and Ellis.” Indeed, Cahun even translated writings by Havelock Ellis into English. So while Cahun shared an interest in Freud with the Surrealists, she came to Freud and other theorists of sexuality from a different point of view. As I discuss in Chapter 4 of this book, Cahun took a critical view of Freudian theory, calling into question its normative
elements. Furthermore, Cahun’s interest in the various ways sexological writers such as Ellis theorized femininity and homosexuality crops up in many of the writings that make up *Disavowals*.

For the Surrealists, the kinds of chance juxtaposition that were created as a result of word games and visual creations like the “exquisite corpse” could reveal the unconscious or set of unexpected chains of association in their readers/viewers. Many of their methods were collaborative. As Breton observed in the “Manifesto of Surrealism,” “The forms of Surrealist language adapt themselves best to dialogue.” Surrealism, he says, should return to dialogue “in its absolute truth,” where each interlocutor “simply pursues his soliloquy without trying to derive any special dialectical pleasure from it and without trying to impose anything whatsoever upon his neighbor.” Rather than being forced to respond according to convention, the Surrealist speaker will simply use his interlocutor as a “springboard for the mind.” This is the kind of dialogue Breton and others pursued in *Les Champs Magnétiques*, which he calls the “first purely Surrealist work.”

Cahun, like, many of the Surrealists, had no patience with sexual or social conventions. She and Moore drew on many strategies in their photomontages, and Cahun’s writings, especially the dream narrative included in *Disavowals*, are sometimes reminiscent of Surrealist texts. *Disavowals* has certain affinities with the *Chants de Maldoror* (1868–69) by Isadore Ducasse, the Comte de Lautréamont, that became a model for Surrealist literary method. Surrealist texts like Breton’s paradigmatic “Soluble Fish,” with its wild juxtapositions and confusing rhetoric, were known to Cahun through her readings of Surrealist journals. These surely helped to give license to the nonlinear and evocative collage of writings that make up *Disavowals*. Yet Cahun’s writings always retain a certain self-questioning logic that can, with work, be teased out. This sets Cahun’s rhetoric apart from many of the texts experimenting with Surrealist poetics. In terms of their thematics, the writings of *Disavowals* are more closely connected to the work of Cahun’s friend René Crevel than to that of Breton. Crevel’s *Mon corps et moi* (1924), for example, explores such issues as unconventional desire, memory and the body through a series of meditations mixing conventional narrative with poetic evocation.

For many Surrealists these dialogic activities were part of a panoply of methods meant to give access to unconscious desires and liberate the subject from social convention. In Breton’s words, “every means must be worth trying, in order to lay waste to the ideas of family, country, religion.” Cahun and Moore drew upon many Surrealist themes and methods, but their use of them was directed and purposeful. The purpose was not so much to lay waste to conventional values as to undermine those values while also proposing new ones that would open up space for cultural others—women and homosexuals in particular. The games that Cahun and Moore play in the writings and images of *Disavowals* propose new paradigms of art and subjectivity, of relationships and desire, albeit in circuitous and often confusing ways. But the reader/viewer who follows them on the journey through the book will, ultimately, if she pays enough attention and gives it enough time, be brought to think about ways to “exist otherwise.”
Reading Claude Cahun’s *Disavowals*

Gender, identity, sexuality, subjectivity and desire are central to the construction of *Disavowals*. However, if Cahun imagined that *Disavowals* would, as she stated, “force my contemporaries out of their sanctimonious conformism,” it was because, for Cahun, the personal was political. A close reading of *Disavowals* with her contemporary context in mind shows that Cahun’s text explicitly addressed her cultural milieu—be it avant-garde or mainstream. The chapters of this book will set *Disavowals* into the wider context of the dominant culture of the 1920s.

Until now, scholarship has given us only a partial view of *Disavowals*. The same few photomontages have appeared in books and articles along with some of the more accessible and evocative short passages of text. However, when excerpts from *Disavowals* are taken piecemeal, and small passages or individual photomontages are excerpted from the whole, the larger arguments of *Disavowals* are lost. Each of these passages was also meant by Cahun to be read in the work’s larger context. When they are read as part of the whole work, their interrelationships with other passages in the book become manifest. When a particular portion of the text is removed from the whole, the contrasts, similarities and dialogues between images and texts—the very dialogues that ultimately produce Cahun’s arguments as they recur and develop in different forms throughout the book—are no longer visible. For this reason, I have chosen to discuss *Disavowals* as a whole and to try to trace its major themes from chapter to chapter as a reader picking up the book might do. This study thus begins with chapter I of *Disavowals*, and analyzes the photomontages and texts in roughly the order in which they appear in the book. Rather than giving a complete account of each of Cahun’s chapters, I have chosen to focus on the themes and issues that I see as most pressing. Because of the nature of *Disavowals*, because of its quality as a visual and textual collage, the reader will see ideas that recur from chapter to chapter in Cahun’s text also recurring in mine.

Primary to this context is the status of gender in postwar France. The First World War fundamentally changed gender dynamics in Europe. During the war, with able-bodied men at the front and away from industrial and urban centers, women moved into positions from which they had previously been both culturally and socially excluded. When the war was over, they were loath to give up their newly found freedoms and responsibilities. Thus emerged the figure of the “modern woman”—a woman who wore trousers, cropped her hair, drove a car, and even smoked. The modern woman was, in theory, both intellectually and sexually free and uninterested in giving up her freedom to return to the hearth and home. However, the war resulted in greater casualties than had ever been known, and long-standing fears of depopulation led to an active state campaign of postwar pronatalism throughout France. Thus the very moment that saw new roles for women witnessed even stronger counter-arguments for a return to tradition. This *rappel à l’ordre*, or “return to order,” was characterized by a new conservatism across the range of culture. Images of women as classical muses, fertile goddesses and mothers appeared in propaganda, as well as in the fine arts, from conservative academics to members of the avant-garde such as Pablo Picasso.
One of the central aims of *Disavowals* is to lay bare the cultural and psychological means by which women of their day were initiated into conservative heterosexual roles. Calling attention to these repressive structures is the preliminary to offering alternative models of sexuality, love and art. The association between creativity and desire and even sexuality is hardly new. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it remained the dominant paradigm for art making. The work of art was imagined to emerge from the inspiration provided to a male artist by the beauty of his female muse, and the model for this relationship was idealized, romantic and heterosexual. A familiar example of this is Ovid’s story of Pygmalion, who, disgusted with the shortcomings of real women, sculpted an idealized woman and, through his caresses of her perfect, mute form, brings her to life in his own perfectly compliant version of femininity. But if an artist needed his muse to inspire his art—if creativity was dependent upon desire—there was only one partner in the couple whose desire really counted. Only the male artist possessed desire and the ability to transform it into art. The female muse was imagined as a spur to the artist’s desire, not the possessor of her own desire. Furthermore, the very project of the male artist depended on the processes of idealization that Cahun counters throughout *Disavowals*.

This relatively traditional notion of relationship between male artist and female muse could be found even in more radical circles of Surrealism. In the 1920s the relationship between artist and muse began to focus more overtly than ever upon sexuality, especially in Surrealist circles. However, even in these circles, where the liberation of sexuality was preached, not just anyone’s sexuality could be a source of creative endeavor; nor could just anyone’s desire could be sublimated into art. In *Disavowals*, Cahun questions traditional notions of gender and sexuality, ideas about the proper structure of love relationships, and roles conventionally associated with the artist. In doing so, she asks her readers/viewers to imagine sexual and artistic subjects outside the norm.

In Chapter 1 of this book, “Refiguring Romance,” I look at the first chapter of *Disavowals*, a chapter that opens with a photomontage evoking childhood and an epigraph that reads: “At the age of seven, without realizing it, I was already searching for romantic adventure.” This epigraph launches us into an exploration of how paradigms of romantic love inculcated from childhood structure gender and subjectivity. I argue that in this chapter Cahun explores her own transition from girlhood to adulthood as a case study in which social pressures to conform to the traditional family paradigm failed. I analyze how Cahun’s references to early examples of children’s didactic literature, Cahun’s participation in avant-garde theater, her translation of the work of sexologist Havelock Ellis, and her own experimentations with heterosexual love allow her to deligitimize the paradigms of romance that inculcate the female roles of wife and mother.

Chapter 2, “Narcissus and the Magic Mirror,” examines the motif of mirroring in the context of Cahun’s rewritings of the myth of Narcissus. I argue that Cahun’s employment of the Narcissus theme in the montages and texts of *Disavowals* was an attempt to update and critique explorations of subjectivity that had been undertaken by the writers Cahun had most valued in her youth—Symbolists such as André Gide and Rémy de Gourmont—who had themselves rewritten the myth at the turn of the century. I show how, in the place of the traditional myth in
which Narcissus is male, and Echo, who reflects him, is his female supplement, Cahun proposes a process of reciprocal reflection—an intersubjective process in which the differences between subject and object are broken down. This exploration of the possibilities of intersubjectivity continues the argument for an alternative paradigm and points the way forward, which Cahun calls “neo-narcissism.”

Cahun opens chapter III of *Disavowals* with the epigraph: “Surely, you are not more of a pederast than I?” This launches us into “Reimagining Art and (Homo) Sexuality: Against Idealization,” where I trace Cahun’s complex exploration of issues of homosexuality, aestheticism and classicism. Cahun’s images and texts critique idealization as it appears in the classical work of art and in the psychological workings of memory and desire. Analyzing Cahun’s work as it addresses the writings of Gide and Victor Hugo as well as the analytic paradigms of psychoanalysis, I argue that the poems, quips and fables that make up this chapter work with the photomontages to counter the repressive classical models of the *rappel à l’ordre* of the interwar years. At the same time, they question dominant paradigms of the heterosexual family structure and propose an alternative aesthetic model to the universalizing ideals of classicism. Cahun explores the process of idealization as it cuts across both aesthetic models, the psychology of desire, and the workings of memory and offers an alternative model for interrelationships based on what she calls the “insufficient givens,” a model that embraces partiality and difference in place of totalization and idealization.

In Chapter 4, “Mirrors of Femininity, Sensuality and Desire,” I discuss Cahun’s evocation of the body as a sensory organ, and her reimagining of the relationships between femininity, sensation and subjectivity. Taking the photomontages introducing chapters IV and V of *Disavowals* as a starting point, I show how the texts and photomontages of these chapters play with dominant paradigms of femininity and social expectations of female desire, while also proposing alternative models of femininity. I discuss the relationship between *Disavowals* and the theories of Jacques Lacan. In doing so I examine the reception of Freud in France in the 1920s, and pay particular attention to Cahun’s engagement with notions of infantile sexuality in Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, the poetry of Baudelaire and Verlaine, and the philosophy of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.

In Chapter 5 I look at the last three plates of *Aveux non avenus*. I encourage readers to meditate on Cahun’s relation to Dada and Surrealism, and I explore her proposals of alternative models of desire and creativity. This requires a further examination of Freud, in particular his account of dreams. I show how, in their creation of the photomontages, and in Cahun’s text, Cahun and Moore suggest models of desire and creativity based in collaboration that might replace the unequal relationship between partners assumed by the heterosexual norms of both the dominant culture and some Surrealism. I discuss what Cahun calls “The Unique Innumerable” in relation to the final plate and chapter of *Disavowals* and describe how they draw together the many themes of the book in order to propose a means of creating the “self-pride” that might enable alternative models of love and interpersonal relationships. Finally, a short conclusion outlines Cahun’s and Moore’s activities after *Aveux non avenus*. 
Throughout *Disavowals*, Cahun unravels both the dominant and the avant-garde cultures of the 1920s in order to imagine other possibilities. And in the overall experience of *Disavowals* she points, however obliquely, toward alternatives—toward what she calls in the text “other morals and other loves.” This model of “other morals” and “other loves” could not be more germane to the culture of the twenty-first century. Only by seeing Cahun’s book as a whole and by setting the images and texts into their original contexts can we understand her prescient attempt to reimagine gender and sexuality and derive a new set of morals and a new way of conceiving love. Doing so not only enriches our understanding of Cahun’s significance to her own cultural context—to Paris between the wars, to literary or theatrical Paris of the 1920s, to the artistic culture of Dada and Surrealism; it also allows us to see more fully the significance to our own cultural moment of her engagement with issues of gender, sexuality, aesthetics and subjectivity. For Cahun’s most sweeping project is to propose an entirely new way of thinking about the relationship between self and other that breaks down hierarchies, barriers and binary oppositions, and to imagine a model of subjectivity informed by alternative structures of desire: “My lover will not be the subject of my drama” says Cahun, “s/he will be my collaborator.”

Notes

4. Many of these texts are republished in Cahun, *Écrits*, ed. Leperlier.
5. One thinks, for example, of Louis Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris*, which was serialized in *La Revue Européene*, in advance of its publication as a book by Gallimard in 1924.
11. I am greatly indebted to François Leperlier’s research on Cahun, which appears in his two comprehensive and insightful critical biographies: *Claude Cahun: L’écart et la métamorphose: essai* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992); and *Claude Cahun: L’exotisme intérieur* (Paris: Fayard, 2006), as well as the collection of writings by Cahun, *Écrits*, referenced above.
Reading Claude Cahun’s *Disavowals*


13 For example, even as she wants to shift the focus of analysis from Butler’s concept of performance to Eve Sedgwick’s “interrogation of contemporary theories of difference,” Natalya Lusty maintains that “for Cahun, the photographic self-portrait is itself a mask that extends and confounds the self as a subject in the making.” Natalya Lusty, *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Burlington, VT and Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 82.


15 Whitney Chadwick observed in her excellent essay for the *Mirror Images* exhibition: “the neatness with which Cahun’s photographs have been annexed to postmodern concerns with the decentered subject and with identity as contingent and mutable has obscured the complexity and contradictions of her writings and blinded many to the works’ representations of conflicted identities.” Chadwick, *Mirror Images*, 7.


18 For example, Gen Doy has recently claimed, “Aveux non avenus both displays Cahun and conceals her at the same time, through words and pictorial collages, as autobiographic elements are mixed with poetic fantasy.” Doy, *Claude Cahun*, 6. Lusty describes *Disavowals* as an “anti-teleological autobiographical project.” Lusty, *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 90.

Latimer’s work offers a rich and complex account of the relationships between Moore and Cahun, as well as theoretical discussion of how their work engages issues of gender, sexuality and homosexuality. No one has done more to establish the immediate context inhabited by Claude Cahun than François Leperlier, whose excellent monographs (in French) are full of rich detail about her life, activities and personal contacts. See Claude Cahun: L’écart et la métamorphose and Claude Cahun: L’exotisme intérieur. Leperlier’s collection of Cahun’s writings, which includes letters, publications and unpublished manuscripts (Écrits), is also full of rich context in Cahun’s own words.

Cahun used both “Lucy” and “Lucie” as spellings for her name. For example, she published an article “Méditations de Mlle Lucie Schwob” in the journal Philosophies, and her major translation of Havelock Ellis is signed “Lucie.” “Lucie” is a French spelling of “Lucy,” and given that Cahun spent a significant time in England and on the Isle of Jersey, it is not surprising that both spellings are used.

The following biography is indebted to the work of Leperlier and drawn from his books on Cahun as well as letters and memoirs published in the volume of Cahun’s writings he edited.


Vues et visions has been described by Tirza True Latimer as “an exercise in double vision, consist[ing] of twenty-five pairs of prose poems, each framed by a drawing. One page describes a mundane ‘view,’ elevated by way of fantasy to the status of a ‘vision’ on the facing page. Each view transpires in a real location (the Brittany seaport of Le Croisic where Cahun and Moore vacationed) and in real time; each vision transpires on the mythic terrain of classical antiquity: Piraeus, Rome, Hadrian’s villa. The adoption of antiquity as a point of reference, while redolent of mainstream high culture, would have resonated within Paris’s subculture, where influential women and men of letters contributed to homophile reconstructions of antiquity from the turn of the century until the Second World War.” Latimer, Women Together/Women Apart, 78.


Leperlier, L’exotisme intérieur, 66.

Ibid., 160.

The address book is in the Cahun Archive of the Jersey Heritage Trust, where I was able to consult it first-hand.

Lucy Schwob to Adrienne Monnier, Paris, July 2, 1926, Caen, IMEC.

Lucy Schwob to Adrienne Monnier, Nantes, July 23, 1926, Paris, BLJD.

For an excellent discussion of the shifting relationship between Monnier and Cahun as well as an account of the possible reasons for Monnier’s refusal to publish the book or write an introduction, see Latimer, Women Together/Women Apart, 82–4.

These images were stored with the handwritten note “Vitrine van den Bergh.” Disavowals identifies the address as 6 rue de Clichy, Paris.

Editions du Carrefour also produced the works of Max Ernst (including La femme cent têtes, 1929) and Giorgio de Chirico, as well as the journal Bifur. The introductory pages of Aveux non avenus describe the deluxe edition—the first on japon nacre paper containing the original plates, seven more on japon imperial numbered 2 to 8. Two more impressions were not for sale. We are told that each of these editions included the author’s original
sketches for the plates. Further copies (39 on Madagascar paper, 370 on vélin pur fil Lafuma, as well as 55 hors commerce and 25 press copies) were published, with the total edition adding up to 500.

34 See De Muth, Disavowals, 216–17, n. 6.


39 Leperlier, L’exotisme intérieur, 60. Leperlier also discusses the connections between this poem and the writings of late Symbolist poets such as Rémy de Gourmont and Paul Fort, as well as its affinities with the Comte de Lautréamont’s Maldoror (61).

40 Leperlier, L’exotisme intérieur, 72.

41 Ibid., 63.

42 Durozoi, History of the Surrealist Movement, 702.

43 Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 602 and n. 30.

44 Leperlier, L’exotisme intérieur, 108.


46 Cahun was an avid collector of Surrealist books and journals. An auction of her collection in 1973 indicates that she owned a first edition of Nadja as well as a copy of Amour Fou personally inscribed to her and Suzanne Malherbe by Breton. See Sotheby and Co, Catalogue of Modern French and German Literature and Illustrated Books, Monday April 16, 1973.

47 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 165; Cahun, Disavowals, xxiv.

48 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 1, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 177; Cahun, Disavowals, 1.

49 As Tirza True Latimer has discussed, in the 1930s, Cahun attended psychoanalytic lectures and demonstrations at St. Anne’s Hospital, sometime accompanied by Henri Michaux. See Latimer, Women Together/Women Apart, 86.


See Claudia Mesch, “Serious Play: Games and Early Twentieth-Century Modernism,” in David Getsy (ed.), *From Diversion to Subversion: Games, Play and Twentieth-Century Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2011), 65: “Surrealist games can then be best understood as tools towards automatism, as strategies that attempt to pool a process of collective thought unmediated by the individual ego, or to short-circuit the conscious workings of the individual mind as it works its way through and applies the rules of the game to the actions at hand … In Surrealism, the ends of *agôn*, that is the regulated and antagonistic relation between powers and the drive to win, are repositioned such that the id, either individual or collective, might, with the proper surrealist discipline and perseverance, be summoned as a reluctant opponent and be forced to reveal itself in language and image.”


Jean Léon Gérôme’s *Pygmalion and Galatea* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 27.200) and George Bernard Shaw’s play are perhaps the most famous examples. Whitney Chadwick discusses the importance of the artist/muse paradigm in Surrealist circles in her groundbreaking book *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1985). See also the anthology *Surrealism and Women*, ed. Mary
Ann Caws, Rudolf Kuenzli and Gwen Raaberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993); and Caws, “Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art,” in Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed.), The Female Body in Western Culture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). Salvador Dalí’s paintings of his female partners or Man Ray’s surrealist image of his muse Lee Miller imagined as the Venus de Milo are apt visual examples. Lee Miller was, of course, a photographer in her own right, but even she was often cast in the role of the muse to Man Ray’s genius. However, as Amy J. Lyford has shown, in her own work Miller contested the role of female muse. See Lyford’s excellent essay, “Lee Miller’s Photographic Impersonations, 1930–1945: Conversing with Surrealism,” History of Photography 18 (Autumn 1994): 230–41. Briony Fer and Penelope Rosemont offer nuanced discussions of the difficulty of being both artist and muse in their work; see Batchelor, Wood and Fer, Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism; and Penelope Rosemont (ed.), Surrealist Women: An International Anthology (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998). This dominance of the male partner in the artistic couple has a long history that continued into the later twentieth century. For a series of studies of this phenomenon, see Anne Middleton Wagner, Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O’Keeffe (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

See the discussions of sexuality and eroticism among male Surrealists published in La révolution surréaliste, repr. in Xavière Gauthier, Surréalisme et sexualité (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).
Refiguring Romance
Childhood, Romance, Masquerade

At the age of seven, without realizing it, I was already searching for romantic adventure, and doing it with the strategic impudence and the lack of strength and coordination that characterise me still.¹

The first chapter of Disavowals opens with the letters “R. C. S.” and the above epigraph. On the next page, a photomontage evokes the epigraph, albeit somewhat obliquely (Figure 1.1). The phrase “at the age of seven” might describe the photograph at the bottom center of the photomontage—an image of Cahun as a young girl—and the entire composition appears to be oriented around this figure. Indeed, the other elements of the photomontage radiate from the image of the girl, and since many of the figures are photographs of Cahun and bear the same general features, it is tempting to see them as developing out of her. This notion is reinforced by the repetition of a photograph of a severe-looking Cahun that emerges from the right side of the girl’s head and is derived from a picture in which Cahun poses costumed in harsh light with her hair slicked back (Figure’s 1.2, 1.3). This image of Cahun’s face grows larger as it extends to the top of the photomontage, much as a child would grow up into an adult. Yet the images are not those of a girl maturing; rather, the photograph is simply progressively enlarged, and the cropping narrows to focus on the figure’s face. What is more, the nipples, which are emphasized by the harsh lighting of the photograph, appear only in the smallest version of Cahun so that any idea of development from flat-chested child to ample woman is left out of the picture. Other elements of the photomontage are less easily identified. In the lower-left corner: a cut-out of an old-fashioned girl’s coat with Cahun’s face pasted in. Above a pair of feet: a youthful portrait of Cahun’s uncle, the Symbolist poet Marcel Schwob. Two cats emanate diagonally from the left of the girl’s head, followed by a drawing (by Marcel Moore) of the actor Édouard de Max (Figure 1.4) and a cropped photograph of Michelangelo’s David, the genitals masked by a fig leaf and the figure’s left thigh inscribed with a tattoo-like line drawing of a maiden. At the top center of the montage, the head and shoulders of a man emerge from Cahun’s head; the same man appears in a snapshot at the upper-right corner. Other elements include a photograph of a doll in a sailor’s cap, two squirrels in a tree, and repeated images of neatly folded men’s striped shirts, one of them stabbed in the

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Refiguring Romance
Childhood, Romance, Masquerade

At the age of seven, without realizing it, I was already searching for romantic adventure, and doing it with the strategic impudence and the lack of strength and coordination that characterise me still.²
1.1 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Faceplate for Chapter I entitled R. C. S. in *Aveux non avenus*, 1930.
chest by a knife. Each of these elements is set against a black background; Cahun and Moore leave enough space around the images to give the impression of a series of unconnected fragments floating behind the central photograph of Cahun as a girl. Many of these elements allude, albeit obliquely, to the epigraph that introduces the photomontage, as well as to the texts that follow in the chapter. And each of them alludes to the theme that I focus on in this chapter: Cahun’s exploration of how paradigms of romantic love instilled in childhood structure gender and subjectivity. The images that evoke this theme swirl confusedly around the photograph of the young Cahun, because the chapter explores a struggle with romance that toys with, but ultimately rejects, traditional ideas of heterosexual romance; in doing so, the chapter introduces the possibility of new forms of love.

Cahun prefaces the first chapter of *Disavowals* with an autobiographical note. Writing retrospectively, she describes her unconscious search from an early age for “romantic adventure” (*l’aventure sentimentale*). She comments further that she is obstinate and clumsy in matters of the heart even as an adult. As the chapter unfolds, however, it becomes clear that this confession is the prelude to a sequence of texts that, together with the photomontage, not only lays bare Cahun’s romantic proclivities, but also calls attention to the way in which romantic paradigms are constructed, taught and established to regulate gender and sexuality. Cahun’s ideas about how this takes place are hinted at in the epigraph. The description of the author “at the age of seven” introduces the theme of childhood (or, more precisely, girlhood) and suggests that this process begins at an early stage of psychological development. Cahun’s interest in the forces that inform the progress into adulthood is embedded in the epigraph, for she is writing as an adult who realizes that certain characteristics developed in childhood continue to haunt her. Significantly, Cahun writes from the point of view of failure. She was searching for romance as a child, and she continues this clumsy quest in spite of herself. Powerful forces seem to be at work.

For Cahun, the progression from childhood to adulthood involves a kind of masquerade—an assumption of predetermined roles—that is explored both in the photomontage and in the chapter. These roles are connected to the prescriptions of heterosexual “romance,” the sentimental adventure in which women are defined by, and subservient to, their relationships with men. Rather than accept these romantic stories and roles, however, Cahun subverts them,
unmasking their conventionality and calling into question traditional ideas of girlhood and womanhood. The image of Cahun at the bottom center, taken from a family snapshot of around 1900, serves as a visual starting point from which a series of faces emanates in rough diagonals. The images in the rest of the montage, many of which are Cahun’s own from around 1925–29, spring from the child at the bottom center. Thus, in its composition and its content, the montage immediately evokes the theme of maturation and, I will argue, puts under stress the way in which such development is usually specifically gendered.

Through her life, Cahun felt herself to be different, an outsider to conventional society. Writing in a letter to a close friend sixteen years after the publication of *Disavowals*, Cahun described her childhood, highlighting those aspects of her upbringing that made her different from “normal” children:

An “Aryan” mother … obese … struck by mental illness, according to the psychiatrists, institutionalized … a Jewish father … [at the time of] the Dreyfus affair … an idealist education … even the thought of normal relationships and activities frightening my family, who, in order to protect me from a world that seemed to me a priori hostile and from a heredity that they judged to be a priori fatal. [My father] could offer me nothing better on my seventh birthday than this: “I am very sorry for having brought you into this world.” … with real tears in his eyes (that was the worst!) … I never complained; I expressed myself as little as possible; one couldn’t have been more docile; more studious.2

Cahun knew she was different from other girls not only because of her familial origins, but also because, thanks to the efforts of her grandmother, she had an unusual education for a girl. In the same letter, she recounted how her blind grandmother required her to read aloud from the classics (an unusual activity for a girl of her age)—“extracts from Seneca … the death of Socrates, the works of Homer, of Sophocles, Spartan legends such as the account of the ‘patriotic’ mother [‘return with your shield or on it’] and the one where the child, without saying a word, allows a wolf to devour his entrails.” Cahun observes that her sense of herself as a misfit, combined with an education in classical literature, “taught me at a young age to resist all religious conformity, and even pagan or civic conformity.”3 She describes the process of growing up as an effort to “win her freedom” from such conformity.

Discussions of *Disavowals* tend to frame the images and text in relation to Cahun’s unusual upbringing and subsequent quest for individuality. François Leperlier describes some of the book’s dominant themes:

1. The impossible relationship. Love caught between narcissism and alterity (heterosexuality);
2. The ambivalence of the self-image (childhood, androgyny); 3. The representation of
femininity (auto-eroticism and homosexuality); 4. The self-portrait (the necessity that it fit the self); 5. The nostalgia for Being (a profound hierophany); 6. Aesthetic will, the poet above all others; 7. The egoist stance. Social individualism.

He describes *Disavowals* as “an absolutely centered book, in which there is only the question of self, in which [Cahun] alone is her own object of perplexity.” And yet, as Leperlier’s summary of the book’s themes implies, each of these themes of self-exploration also has the potential to shed light on broader social, aesthetic and political issues—the problematic of unconventional love, the role of childhood in self-image, the status of femininity, the difficulty of self-knowledge, and the role played in this by (self-) representation and so on. Indeed, Cahun’s own description of the purpose of *Disavowals* was never exclusively personal. The escape from conformity allowed her to focus on the question of self, but this question was not posed only for personal reasons. Instead, Cahun found in...
her own difference the ability to deconstruct preconceived ideas about the self and its relation to the social, cultural and political world, and to imagine other possibilities. And she wanted to share her perspective with others. In a letter from 1950, Cahun described *Disavowals* as a book with a social agenda:

In vain, in *Disavowals* I tried as hard as I could—with black humor, provocation, defiance—to force my contemporaries out of their sanctimonious conformism, out of their complacency. The ostracism was almost total. Either silence, or the basest insults. This was how the “literary critics”—except those at *Aux Écoutes*—received the “prose poems” of this undesirable Cassandra. Did Cassandra ever have the least opportunity to make her warnings known?6

Clearly, Cahun believed that the message of *Disavowals* was lost on most of her contemporaries. She describes herself as a Cassandra, referring to the Greek prophet who was given the ability to predict the future, but also cursed with the fact that none of her contemporaries believed her predictions. However, if few of Cahun’s contemporaries listened to the messages in her book, these messages should not be lost on us. The journey into which the reader is drawn is intended to denaturalize social and political assumptions, and, in Cahun’s words, to force her “contemporaries out of their sanctimonious conformism—out of their complacency.” In this chapter, I explore Cahun’s ideas about the way conventional ideals of romance structure gender and sexuality in the transition from childhood to adulthood.

**Girlhood and the Masquerade**

The epigraph to chapter I of *Disavowals* is drawn from an article titled “Carnaval en chambre” (“Bedroom carnival”) that Cahun had published in 1926 in the journal *La Ligne de Cœur*. (Cahun also included portions of this essay in the body of the chapter.) Looking at the “Carnival” essay in detail will help us to understand more fully Cahun’s interest in childhood as an early site for the inculcation of gender roles. The carnival offers Cahun an alternative paradigm for understanding social interactions. In the essay, Cahun explores the differences between her reaction to the carnival and that of the more conservative members of her family. She recounts in the first person her memories of running to the window at lunchtime to watch the carnival arriving and of describing to her elders the “Pierrot costumes, crazy costumes, and pink or blue baby costumes.”7 It is no accident that an image of Cahun herself costumed as a Pierrot forms the centerpiece of the photomontage that introduces chapter I of *Disavowals*, nor that the colors she describes evoke the gendering of children through clothing. As the essay continues, the little girl (Cahun) wants to disobey her parents and go down into the street rather than watching the procession from a distance: “Find a pretext in order to go outside, because parents have incomprehensible prejudices against the virtuous crowd.”8 Cahun suggests that the child has a natural or uncorrupted understanding of the carnival crowd and that adults have lost that affinity. She describes herself as “digging deep into the multicolored evidence of pleasure” while most people “steel themselves against the flowering of dissimulations (false feelings).”9
Thus Cahun’s narrative makes a general distinction between the child’s fascination with the “multicolored evidence of pleasure” and the adult’s prejudice against it. But Cahun also describes herself as a different kind of child because she wants to participate directly and consciously in the masquerade. While she concedes that for most children the general view of the parade is primary, she distinguishes her own narrower childhood interest: “For me that was too elaborate a menu to which I preferred the unspeakable flavors of the picnic.”

Here she implies that rather than passively viewing the entire succession of “dissimulations” from a distance, she wanted to take part in these activities, to sample the specific foods of the carnival. That is to say, she wanted to participate in specific acts of masquerade. This is the point in the essay from which Cahun excerpts the epigraph to chapter I: “At the age of seven, without realizing it, I was already searching for romantic adventure [l’aventure sentimentale], and doing it with the strategic impudence and the lack of strength and coordination that characterize me still.” Cahun equates her interest in the carnival and its masquerades with the search for “romantic adventure,” and the sentence itself invokes childlike characteristics: The child is impudent, stubbornly disregarding the feelings of others; the child lacks strength and coordination; these are all characteristics that children are expected to outgrow. But Cahun describes herself as different from the conventionally socialized child. On the one hand, although she writes from the perspective of an adult, she remains impudent, weak and clumsy. On the other hand, even from a young age, these characteristics were “strategic.” Cahun used them as tools in the romantic adventure, rather than being ruled by them as a child would typically be. Thus, picking and choosing the individual “dissimulations” of the carnival, Cahun consciously assumed particular roles rather than falling into those that were prescribed to her as socially acceptable.

Cahun describes her own taste for the “dissimulations” of the carnival as “inavouable” (unspeakable), a term that prefigures the “aveux” of Aveux non avenus. But what is shameful about Cahun’s interest in knowingly participating in the dissimulations of the carnival’s masquerade? As the essay proceeds, the answer becomes clear: the carnival is not an aberrant event but an emblem for social relationships in general.

The rest of the essay plays with the tropes of the mask, the doll and the carnival while making it clear that there is little distinction between everyday behavior and the more overt outward identities or dissimulations of the carnival. Everyone takes up roles: this is unspeakable, Cahun suggests, because acknowledging that identity is a masquerade would denaturalize the roles that people routinely play, opening up the possibility that there are alternative ways of living, that individuals can change the roles they play. Describing different kinds of masks, Cahun says: “The masks are made of different materials: cardboard, velvet, flesh, Word. The carnal mask and the verbal mask are worn in all seasons. I soon learned to prefer these two non-commercial strategies to the others.”

It is easy to see how cardboard and velvet can be used to make the masks and costumes of masquerade. However, Cahun wants her reader to see that “Flesh,” the comportment of the body, and “Word,” language itself, are masks that can, like the carnival mask, be changed at will. The final line of “Carnaval en chambre” reads: “Announcing the perpetual carnival.” This suggests that for Cahun, in everyday life as in the carnival, one can construct one’s own masks.
While the essay begins with a relatively straightforward description of “carnivals of my childhood,” it ends with the striking claim that everything is a masquerade. Thus, more than half a century before Judith Butler formulated her theories of performativity, Claude Cahun was already exploring the notion that identity is, at least in part, performative. Cahun’s essay pre-dates by three years the English psychoanalyst Joan Riviere’s germinal essay “Womanliness as Masquerade;” moreover, as will become clear, Cahun’s idea of the masquerade encompasses all of human subjectivity. Postmodern critics are thus right to link Cahun’s interest in the masquerade to the idea of performativity. What has been left out of these accounts, however, is the very pointed critique that Cahun makes in Disavowals of the way that gendered roles are inculcated from childhood through paradigms of romantic, heterosexual love.

Denaturalizing the Female Self

The exploration of playing (or refusing to play) expected social roles is a central theme of the photomontage that opens chapter I. A portrait of Cahun occupies the center of the photomontage above the central image of her as a child. The figure’s face is impassive, suggesting no emotion, and the attributes of femininity are transformed into stylized signs. Cahun’s own hair is covered and replaced with a doll-like wig. Her face is a white mask with highly stylized markings for eyebrows, dark shadows around the eyes, dark lips, and heart shapes on the cheeks. Significantly, this image of Cahun complements the doll that radiates from the head of the childhood picture of Cahun, and it resembles the little paper doll in the lower-left corner of the montage. The image of Cahun with the white makeup suggests artifice, and the dolls link that artifice to children’s play. Indeed, in this photograph, Cahun alludes to an adult form of “play:” her own experience with the explicit masquerade of the theater. Cahun is playing the role of “Elle” in the play Barbe bleue that was staged by Le Plateau, the avant-garde Parisian theater, under the direction of Pierre-Albert Birot in the 1920s (Figure 1.5). As her generic name “Elle” (She) suggests, Cahun represented a de-individualized woman. And yet this woman seems to have no natural characteristics. Birot, who was interested in Chinese and Japanese dramatic arts, took an anti-naturalist approach to the theater. As Tirza Latimer recounts, he “instructed his actors to paint their faces into characterless masks and trained them to strip their lines to the essence, so that words became ‘white’, and phrasing ‘monotonous.’”

According to Birot, this involved stripping the natural expressions and gestures of everyday life of their embellishments, which is to say the emotion, gesture and intonation that help us to identify individuality:

In everyday life, we waste words and gestures because we have time to lose and no one is looking, but the actor, a thousand eyes follow his movements and he has only an hour or two to transmit the drama that he performs, it is therefore indispensable that he act and speak with the greatest economy, on stage no waste, nothing must be lost.

Following this logic, what appears to be most “natural” is actually wholly conventional—a series of common signs embellished to hide their lack of
uniqueness. In Birot’s words, “We challenge realism because the realism we are given is false.”

In the photomontage, Cahun and Moore play with the ideas of nature and artifice. Cahun’s artificial face as “Elle” also wittily echoes the creatures immediately adjacent to it; a squirrel with similarly darkly ringed eyes peers out of its wooden den in the hollow of a tree. The image of the squirrel connects the artifice of the masklike “Elle” face and another portrait of Cahun laid bare (or should we say “made natural”?), wearing neither wig nor makeup. Yet the lighting and the way her face hovers on the black background makes this face also appear masklike. Furthermore, this “natural” Cahun forms the right side of an arc of faces that wraps itself around the young Cahun en Pierrot. Each of
these heads seems to reinforce the theme of artifice: a portrait of Cahun’s uncle Marcel Schwob as a young dandy who resembles Oscar Wilde, the writer and aesthete with whom Cahun closely identified; Marcel Moore’s stylized drawing of the head of the notorious homosexual actor Édouard de Max (immediately above the cat’s head); and a head shot that bears a distinct resemblance to Wilde’s lover, the poet Lord Alfred Douglas.

Here, Cahun lines up a series of famous aesthetes who spurned realism but were themselves “unnatural” in their sexuality. She aligns herself with her personal avatars, thus defining a lineage of artifice and aestheticism, but she also uses them to raise the broader idea of denaturalization. Cahun had already begun to explore this theme in her essay “Carnaval en chambre.” In the final section of
the essay, which is titled “Unbreakable Baby” (Bébé incassable), Cahun parodies
the notion that one should “unmask nature” to find “truth.” Her parody centers
around the imagery of a doll. The text begins: “Unmask nature. First it will be
necessary to open our double eyelid. As soon as she is seated, the doll recloses
them. No more gaze, a lid on the soul. Lazarus! Lazarus! Open yourself! ...”16
Initially, we believe that this unmasking will be the result of using the eyes as
a window to the soul. By calling for the opening of the “double eyelid,” Cahun
seems to suggest that this desire to unmask nature is a Western (as opposed to
an Asian) trait. A photograph of Cahun taken at approximately the same time links
this question of the masquerade to Eastern ideas (Figure 1.6). In it, Cahun poses
in a japanese mask that covers her whole face. She wears a cape that is itself
adorned with masks for the eyes, giving the impression that the doll-like face she
wears has already been unmasked. Indeed it is hard not to imagine the doll Cahun
describes in her essay as a double for herself, in her role as Elle, and the Cahun/
doll as a figure for debunking the alignment of nature and truth. Cahun wittily
imagines the futility of transforming the eyes of a doll into the windows to her
soul. The doll is, of course, nothing more than an inanimate replica of a human
being. The doll’s propensity to repeatedly close its eyes, closing the window to
truth, is a way of refusing to admit the gaze that seeks the truth of the self. She
will remain perpetually closed, dead, and the calls to Lazarus are a desperate
attempt to bring her back to life. The notion that there is a natural truth behind
the mask is comical to Cahun, and she represents this by creating this image of
the futility of finding the soul in the body of the doll. At the essay’s end, Cahun
describes how taking off the doll’s makeup gets us no closer to truth. Rather, it
is only when the doll is given back her makeup that she regains her power and
is reanimated. The last line of the essay declares: “Exalt the imagination of the
costume maker. Announcing the Eternal Carnival.”

In exploring nature, artifice, the doll, the mask, and the relationships between
these and social norms, Cahun participates in a kind of cultural questioning that
took many forms of expression between the wars. The primitivist interest in
masks had, of course, begun before the war in the early avant-garde experiments
of the Fauves and Picasso. This interest was taken up by other Surrealists between
the wars, and advanced by the first Colonial Exposition in 1931, a year after the
publication of Disavowals. Yet, while her experiences with the anti-naturalist
theater of Birot drew on non-European sources, Cahun’s ideas about the mask
seem more connected to how the role-playing of everyday life relates to role-
playing in child’s play and the carnival. Learning to mimic certain social roles, to
put on the appropriate masks, she suggests, is encouraged from a young age. The
most important thing from Cahun’s point of view would seem to be that children
be able to identify the artifice of these masks of everyday life and be “strategic,”
as she has been, about how to don them. Put another way, children recognize the
masks as masks, rather than as the natural order of things—they recognize their
own taking up of social roles as a form of masquerade that they perform in order
to survive socially but which they can themselves fashion and control.

In this sense, Cahun’s interest in the masquerade is sympathetic to Roger
Caillois’s writings published in Minotaure in 1935 on “Mimicry and Legendary
Psychasthenia.” Caillois opens this essay by emphasizing the importance of
distinctions for human culture: “[from] whatever side one approaches things,
the ultimate problem turns out in the final analysis to be that of distinction: distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between waking and sleeping, between ignorance and knowledge.” Mimicry, the attempt to look like, sound like, be like another is, Caillois notes, a practice universal among animals and man. Yet it seems to go against the very distinctions that, he says, “demand resolution.” For both Caillois and Cahun, mimicry that is taken up too fully has dangerous consequences for the individual. For Caillois, the unknowing mimicry of one’s surroundings would reach its ultimate point (which he calls “legendary psychasthenia”) when the creature can no longer distinguish the boundaries between itself and the world it inhabits. Among human beings, such a state amounts to a loss of personality and ultimately to mental illness. For Cahun, an unknowing and subservient taking up of social roles is far from desirable. Of course, we would want to distinguish between the mimicry of the moth or the chameleon that imitates the bark of the tree and the masquerade of identity. Or, even more germane to Cahun, to distinguish between the animals that Caillois describes that don masks constructed of materials from their environment, such as the “spider crabs [which] haphazardly gather and collect on their shells the seaweed and polyps of the milieu in which they live,’ and ‘[whose] disguise seems like an act of pure automatism,’ since they deck themselves in whatever is offered to them.”

Looking at Caillois’s essay alongside Cahun’s account, we might surmise that in humans, the difference between the kind of animal mimicry that Caillois describes and normal adult behavior has a developmental component. Just as a child learning language shifts from mimicking sounds to knowingly using them to create meaning, the child playing roles should move from an unthinking mimicry of others to a strategic visual presentation of self. In Cahun’s terms, the child shifts from unknowing mimicry in play to the knowing and strategic presentation of self in the masquerade as celebrated by Cahun and, at approximately the same time, diagnosed as a problem by Joan Riviere. The key for Cahun is that at no point in this development are the roles to be donned in any way natural.

Gender, Romance and the Literature of Girlhood

While in “Bedroom Carnival” Claude Cahun describes the masquerade and links it to childhood, in Disavowals Cahun unravels its origins and points to some of the cultural mechanisms by which children are taught to don particular, gendered masks. Both the photomontage and the epigraph frame this transition in terms of romantic love. In the epigraph we are told that from the age of seven, the writer has been searching, albeit clumsily and stubbornly, for l’aventure sentimentale. This phrase translates literally into English as “sentimental adventure.” However, in French the word “sentimentale” is multivalent, evoking less the idea of nostalgia that it connotes in English than a sense of emotion and feeling often associated with love. In France in the 1920s one of the terms used to refer to what we call in English a “romance novel” (a conventionalized popular love story) was “roman sentimental.” (Other terms for the romance novel—“roman rose,” “roman à l’eau rose” and “roman d’amour”—are also evoked elsewhere in Disavowals in
relation to this theme.) The “aventure sentimentale” thus connotes the idea of a quest for love or romance and links that quest to the transition from girlhood to adulthood. Cahun’s liminal position—poised between the literary establishment and the culture of the avant-garde, daughter of a prominent family whose personal gender identity was untraditional—made her a very critical observer of French cultural values, especially those associated with gender.

These ideas are not only present in the text of chapter I; they also dominate the imagery in the photomontage that opens the chapter. Cahun and Moore evoke the way fashion, children’s literature and children’s play are structured by paradigms of romantic love. The photomontage suggests the integral role such seemingly benign activities play in fixing gender roles. It is composed not only of photographs, but also of clippings from magazines and drawings by Cahun’s lover and intimate partner. Cahun and Moore share this strategy of using nineteenth-century magazine clippings with Max Ernst, whose collage novel, *Femme 100 Têtes*, was published in December 1929, at which point Cahun and Moore had probably finished the photomontages for *Disavowals.* In both cases, the use of the nineteenth-century clippings lends a retrospective and haunting quality to the work. However, whereas Ernst produced seamless images out of disparate elements that disconcert the viewer by creating an impossible, frightening world, Cahun and Moore purposefully emphasize the seams between their images as if to highlight the anachronism of the nineteenth century in the face of their contemporary moment.

At the lower left we see references to the conformity of fashion. A clipping of an old print or magazine illustration shows a wall of identical houses with a horse-drawn carriage running before it. Immediately above it, a cut-out of a lady’s cape and wig skirts the edge of the frame; to the right of the cut-out, a newspaper clipping advertises “MÉDES VRAIES,” or correct fashion. Inside the wig, we see a scaled version of the face of Cahun as a child drawn from the same Pierrot photograph that dominates the bottom half of the montage. The traditional and old-fashioned costume sits awkwardly around the tiny face and, in marked contrast to the central image, takes on the appearance of a paper doll. It suggests a sense of the old-fashioned correctness framing the face of Cahun at the same time as it evokes childhood games of paper dolls and dressing up.

Another site for the early inculcation of gender roles was children’s literature. Educational reforms that had begun in the mid-nineteenth century had done much to increase female literacy to the point that, more so than ever, girls and women had access to stories of girlhood. Some of the most popular children’s books were intended not merely to entertain, but also to educate girls and boys about social expectations. Myths, fables and fairytales presented longstanding male and female archetypes such as Prince Charming and the helpless maiden in need of rescue, or the love-struck girl who waits faithfully for her husband or husband-to-be. Adventure novels featured characters based on these archetypes. Stories were written with educative roles in mind. The photomontage is full of references to such didactic children’s literature. At the right margin, a clipping taken from the nineteenth-century illustrated magazine *Musée des familles*, a magazine aimed at bourgeois Catholic children and families, reads “MUSÉE DES FAMILLES/Rue St Roch No. 29.” The magazine published, in feuilleton form, many celebrated novels, including some by Jules Verne. An implicit allusion to
both Verne and magazines, including children's adventure stories, appears in the middle right, where a clipping (or a drawing meant to look like a clipping) reads “Les aventures du capitaine,” most likely alluding to Verne's *Adventures of Captain Hatteras*, which originally appeared as a serialized *feuilleton* in another nineteenth-century children's magazine, the *Magazine d’Education et de Récréation*, beginning in March 1864. This adventure story involves a dangerous journey to the North Pole and culminates with the discovery of, and jump into, a volcano.23

These allusions serve multiple purposes in the collage. First, they evoke some of the earliest examples of the use of stories in the didactic children’s press to suggest social roles and morals through literature. Second, the connection to Jules Verne had a personal meaning for Cahun. Verne was a friend of Cahun’s grandfather, George Isaac Schwob, with whom he collaborated in writing a vaudeville show in 1849.24 One can surmise that Cahun, like most French children of her age, grew up reading Verne, perhaps even in the serialized format of the nineteenth-century magazines; the stories must have offered a marked contrast to the Seneca and Sophocles that she read aloud to her grandmother. In this reference to Verne, Cahun both alludes to her own personal story and points to the wider social implications of children’s play and children’s literature. Cahun’s perspective on such didactic literature would have been quite different from that of other girls of her generation. For, as we have seen, her experience as a child and her education were nowhere near the norm.

Reimagining Girlhood: Cahun’s “Sophie the Symbolist”

Even before we were five, we had exhausted all the games of love: when one has begun with the symbol, one has little taste for the thing itself.25

We have begun to see how Cahun attempted to imagine alternative models of gender identification during childhood in the photomontage that opens chapter I. Certain elements of the photomontage are directly related to this issue. Toward the center, moving up from the head of Cahun as a Pierrot, we see a doll, a squirrel, and a knife cutting into a shirt. Each of these elements relates to a famous children’s story that Cahun had already publicly deconstructed. Even before the publication of *Disavowals*, Cahun had shown an interest in demystifying the way that children’s literature and children’s games were used in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to inculcate correct behavior and particularly gender roles. In the 1920s, Claude Cahun published her first overt critique of traditional femininity in a series of essays titled *Héroïnes*. The essays were published in two important Parisian literary journals, *Le Mercure de France* and *Le Journal Littéraire*.26 In each essay, Cahun critically rewrote and commented on the story of a famous female figure. The subjects she critiqued in these essays ranged from the biblical to the mythological to the fictional (for example Eve, Judith, Mary, Salome, Sappho, Delilah, Beauty [from Beauty and the Beast] and Cinderella).27 Many of the essays took to task the role models that would have been held up as a mirror for maturing girls—figures from fairytales and the Bible.
In *Héroïnes*, Cahun also addressed one of the most popular works of didactic contemporary fiction, *Les Malheurs de Sophie* by Sophie Rostopchine, Comtesse de Ségur (1799–1874). Although *Les Malheurs de Sophie* was first published in 1858, it was still extremely popular in the early twentieth century, when Cahun, Moore and their contemporaries were coming of age, and it remained a widely read classic of children’s literature between the wars. According to the literary historian Sophie Deroisin, the works of Madame de Ségur hold a central place “in the history of girlhood for the personages that have long constituted the mythology of girlhood, the models of ‘dear mothers’ she proposed for generations, and the set of moral and religious strictures that would dominate from her time until today.”

Cahun and her peers were raised reading these stories, and she, like other bourgeois girls of her generation, was subjected to the ideals of femininity and relations between the sexes that they advanced. Cahun’s witty retelling of Ségur’s *Les Malheurs de Sophie* in “Sophie la Symboliste” is worth examining in detail because it enlightens us as to Cahun’s critical attitude toward the way seemingly innocent children’s games inculcate gendered paradigms of romance. *Les Malheurs de Sophie* was an instructional story for young girls disguised as a fictional memoir of the author. Ségur recounts the adventures of a little girl named Sophie, who lives on an estate in the French countryside. The book opens with a dedication by the Comtesse de Ségur to her granddaughter, where she warns:

*My dear child, you have said to me so often: Oh! Grandmother, how I love you! You are so good! Grandmother was not always good, and there are many children who have been naughty like her and who have been corrected as she has. Here are the true stories of a little girl that grandmother knew well during her childhood. She was angry, she became sweet; she was a glutton, she became restrained; she was a liar, she became sincere; she was a thief, she became honest; finally, she was bad, she became good. Grandmother has tried to do the same. Do as she does, my dear children; it will be easy for you, you who do not have all of Sophie’s faults.*

The book’s nineteenth-century author thus acknowledges that little girls do not naturally behave according to the norms of bourgeois femininity. She stresses that her aim is to teach the young girls of France the restraint and self-sacrifice necessary for appropriate female behavior. Cahun’s sexuality and her creative ambition were, to say the least, at odds with the models of behavior proposed by Madame de Ségur. This book, so instrumental in shaping the normative behavior and romantic aspirations of early twentieth-century French women, was the perfect fodder for Cahun’s deconstructive project in *Héroïnes*.

*Ségur’s* *Les Malheurs de Sophie* recounts a series of episodes in which the young girl Sophie’s selfishness and inability to empathize with others—what we might call her narcissism—lead to horrible consequences for her friends, pets and possessions. Indeed, it gets Sophie into all kinds of trouble. Sophie’s focus on her own desire leads to the destruction of the things she loves. Attempting to keep her wax doll warm, she melts it in the sun. Practicing with a knife she has been given as a gift, she kills her mother’s goldfishes, and her pets (a rooster, a squirrel, a mule) all come to similar harm. In many of these situations, the protagonist, Sophie, is attempting to perform the expected female role of caring for others, but only thinks about her own feelings. She, like Cahun in the
epigraph to chapter I of *Disavowals*, is impudent: she captures a squirrel, for example, and rather than treating it as a wild creature should be treated, does what she wishes with it. She washes it, feeds it and loves it, assuming that it will love her back, only to be shocked when the squirrel bites her. In other instances her lack of empathy borders on the sadistic. Given a mule and cart, for example, she enjoys the thrill of the cart ride so much that she runs the mule ragged, spooks it, and is devastated when the runaway mule is hit by a larger cart on the road and dies. Cahun’s photomontage includes references to the story of Sophie (the doll, the squirrel and the knife) (Figure 1.7). Thus references to Cahun’s essay and Mme de Ségur’s novel help to explain the succession of images that springs from the right side of Cahun’s Pierrot hat: a doll, a squirrel, and a knife. The cats in the photomontage are Cahun’s own pets and thus suggest a parallel to the pets included in the story of Sophie.

Cahun’s essay in *Héroïnes* titled “Sophie la Symboliste” is a deconstructive reading of the Comtesse de Ségur’s *Les Malheurs de Sophie*. Whereas the Comtesse de Ségur presents each of Sophie’s “malheurs” as an object-lesson in how a young girl should not behave, Cahun interprets the narrative as emblematic of what might happen if, instead of developing according to the expected paradigms of traditional romantic love, the child was, as the title indicates, a “symbolist.” Cahun rewrites Madame de Ségur’s story, reinterpreting it from Sophie’s point of view and transforming it from a warning intended to encourage narcissistic girls to grow into selfless, empathetic women into a call for an egoistic model of femininity free from the desire for heterosexual romantic love or traditional female roles.

Cahun imagined this model of self through the lens of literary symbolism. At the turn of the century, conservative critics had described the Symbolists as narcissistic creatures partaking in the worst forms of anti-social self-infatuation, or *egoïsme*. Proponents of Symbolist aesthetics rejected the notion that the purpose of the arts was to represent the world as it appears to our senses; they proposed instead to create works that would use suggestive (and often abstract) forms, images or sounds to embody transcendent ideas that might evoke an experience of truth beyond the material realm. For Cahun, Symbolism gave license to imagining a true self that did not necessarily have to coincide with her biological gender and the norms associated with it. Significantly, the term “egoism,” which had earlier been used to describe the Symbolists, was bandied about by cultural conservatives in the 1920s, only now it was directed at people like Cahun and Moore. In the aftermath of the First World War, with depopulation fears abounding, anxieties about egoism were attached to those who rejected gender norms (New Women and homosexuals in particular). Associated with fears about depopulation was a more general cultural anxiety about women
usurping the place of men. During the First World War, many women moved into positions that had been left vacant by men at the front, and when the war ended, many women were loath to surrender their newfound legitimacy. With women occupying many of the positions that had been previously reserved for men, the notion that women could actually have selves like those of men was beginning to gain widespread cultural currency.34

In “Sophie la Symboliste,” Cahun advances a witty and complex critique of norms of gender and sexuality and the way in which they are inculcated from early childhood. She rewrites the story of Sophie by imagining the young protagonist of Ségur’s novel as a Symbolist and plays upon the intersections this suggests between Symbolism and egoïsme.

Cahun calls particular attention to the way that Les Malheurs de Sophie traces a progression in which appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in love relations are socially conditioned in childhood through play. She describes Sophie’s first doll as “both the first pleasure and the first sorrow of love, both the deflowerer and the eldest child,”35 thus suggesting that in her play with the doll, Sophie is learning the roles she will ultimately play in romantic and maternal relations. Sophie’s inability to understand the difference between the wax doll and her own self leads to the doll’s destruction. Cahun reminds her readers of the scene in Ségur’s novel where Sophie’s mother warns her not to put her wax doll in the sun because it will melt.36 Cahun records Sophie’s thoughts: “Does the sun hurt me? All the more reason it won’t hurt her, who is much tougher!”37 Sophie’s narcissistic logic leads to the doll melting in the sun. Even at the beginning of the novel, Sophie’s problem stems from her inability (or lack of desire) to distinguish the differences between her love objects and herself.

The problem with Sophie would seem to be that she never progresses from a narcissistic idea of love manifest in childhood to a socially acceptable, self-sacrificing adult love.38 However, Sophie’s narcissism is interpreted by Cahun as a way of thinking for herself, rather than following the instructions of others. Cahun describes Sophie as a “disobedient child” who “trusted her own reason earlier than normal.”39 The stories in Les Malheurs de Sophie are described by Cahun as a series of “experiences,” a French word that means both “experiment” and “experience.” Over and over again Sophie will recognize the separate status of her love objects only when she has experienced it first hand—when they have died or been wounded at her hand: “She loves, and makes bleed only what she loves,” says Cahun.40

Furthermore, in Cahun’s view, as Ségur’s story progresses, Sophie’s interactions with more and more intelligent beings result in her desires coming into greater and greater conflict with them: first a doll (which has no intentionality), then fish, bees, squirrels, mules and, finally, humans. In each successive vignette, Sophie’s “toy” has an increasingly greater potential to express its own desire, separate from Sophie’s wants and needs. And Sophie’s problems stem, Cahun suggests, from her increasingly obvious inability to empathize with those objects, to imagine and accommodate the needs or desires of another. Increasingly, as she wounds them, Sophie’s love objects “fight back:” the bee, the squirrel and the pony all suffer at her hand but also wound her in return with stings, bites and kicks.
The culmination of this progression is found in her cousin Paul, who has the most intentionality of all the objects of Sophie’s desire. When they fight and Sophie scratches Paul’s cheek, Paul protects Sophie by telling the adults that the scratch is a result of a fall. In Ségur’s novel, Paul is ultimately praised for his gallantry in protecting Sophie rather than standing up for his own wants and needs. However, Cahun interprets this story from Sophie’s point of view, seeing it as a confirmation of the idea that the desires of the other are actually determined by her own desires. Cahun imagines Sophie’s delight at encountering “someone who suffers consciously, willingly, for her love!” By the end of the story, in Cahun’s retelling, the blood that Sophie draws from her pony (by using pins as spurs to make it run faster) and her cousin (through the scratch) becomes the sign of her idea of love. For Cahun’s Symbolist Sophie, love is defined by the lack of autonomy of the love object, always suffering (whether intentionally or not) in its accommodation of her desire. Cahun writes:

Then blood, this time the blood of the marvellous animal, so long desired, truly great, truly terrible, which kicks, which brays, which struggles under her heels armed with pins—\textit{with spurs}—to feel the flanks shudder between her exhausted thighs (this would be the donkey); then the blood again, human blood—and someone who suffers consciously, willingly, \textit{for her love!} (her cousin Paul, her innocent accomplice.)

Significantly, blood, the emblem of bodily materiality evoking the specter of death, is transformed here into a sign for the idea of love. In addition, Cahun’s language in describing the little girl Sophie’s thoughts and feelings is infused with sexuality (note the “shuddering flanks” and “exhausted thighs”). This transformation from that which is most material to an idea symbolizing a concept (in this case love) is central to the notion of Sophie as a Symbolist. Indeed, Cahun’s “Sophie the Symbolist” begins with the statement “Idea engenders being—and love precedes the organs that will later make it manifest.” The idea of love, learned properly or improperly through social conditioning in play, precedes physical sexuality. In the case of Sophie the Symbolist, the socialization is so “improper” that the physical embodiment begins early and appears to be sadistic. In this respect it is worth noting that the title of Ségur’s \textit{Les Malheurs de Sophie} overlaps with the Marquis de Sade’s \textit{Justine}, which was subtitled \textit{Les Malheurs de la vertue}, a similarity that Cahun may well have observed herself when imagining the story of “Sophie the Symboliste.” One might say that Cahun’s Sophie is a Sadian version of the original. Cahun’s interest in Sade is made clear in an unpublished manuscript dated 1948–51 dedicated to Suzanne Malherbe, which purports to treat “French thought from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” in which she describes Sade as the “Siamese twin of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.” This pairing of Sade and Rousseau seems to stem from their similar assumption that the natural state of man is to cultivate his own pleasure.

Significantly, “Sophie la Symboliste” is not only a rethinking of gender roles and narcissism. For it also, like the “Carnaval en chambre” and chapter I of \textit{Disavowals}, links these to expectations of romantic love. At the end of “Sophie la Symboliste,” Cahun appends a coda to the story of Sophie, imagining what would happen if Sophie were to meet Paul again when they are twenty years old. Cahun describes the disillusioning encounter that ensues. Recalling their
mishaps together, Sophie imagines that Paul has been helping her with her own “ideas.” Invoking this Symbolist term links Sophie’s experiences with Paul to the notion of Sophie’s own self-cultivation. However, as Cahun tells it, once Sophie has encountered Paul again, she realizes that Paul had always interpreted his suffering on her behalf as enactment of the male role in conventional heterosexual romantic love (what Cahun calls “a banal desire for marriage”). In the final lines of the essay, Cahun records the dialogue between Paul and Sophie when they meet as adults:

Paul: “You’re no longer interested in me?”

Sophie: “Even before we were five, we had exhausted all the games of love: when one has begun with the symbol, one has little taste for the thing itself”

Here Cahun engages some of the central terms of Symbolist theory, contrasting “the idea” conceived by the poet and evoked by the Symbolist poem with the banal material manifestation to be found in “the thing itself.” Furthermore, Cahun composes Sophie’s closing lines in a manner that also leads the reader back to the opening lines of the essay, which read:

The Idea engenders Being—and love precedes the bodily organs that will later make it manifest. So, until the moment when the beast has wings, she must imagine the equivalents of flight.

For Cahun’s Sophie, as for the Symbolists, the “idea” takes precedence, and physical abilities are to be superseded by the imagination. This preeminence of “the idea” (the term Symbolists used for the imaginative notion unrestricted by and transcendent of the physical manifestation of a thing) allows Cahun’s heroine to break free of the material and social constraints faced by women and girls.

From Romance to Maternity

Cahun sees the paradigm of romantic heterosexual love as a constraint. The games that Sophie plays, for example, are intended to teach her to love in a manner that is compatible with marriage and maternity. This theme crops up repeatedly in Disavowals. One passage that alludes directly to “Sophie the Symbolist” appears in chapter VII, when, referring to her Héroïnes series (of which “Sophie la Symboliste” was a part) Cahun writes:

Fairytales are no longer in season. All my stories, all my heroines end up badly, in disgrace. However, this is nothing but a proof by the absurd.

What do you want! We can’t possibly end: “They lived happily ever after and had lots of children.” There are already too many in this world.

This passage explicitly describes Cahun’s refusal to accept that love should follow the paradigms ending in marriage and maternity proposed in fairytales. There
are allusions to this issue in the photomontage as well. On the far right side of the photomontage, about two-thirds of the way down, we see an image of a baby nursing from a breast, probably taken from a reproduction of a Renaissance image of *Maria lactans* (Figure 1.8). Adjacent to this nursing baby, another image of Cahun springs directly from the ear of the Cahun Pierrot. Here Cahun is shown in highly contrasting lighting. She appears to have a flat torso, with nipples pasted on; her hair is slicked down; she looks at us intently with a serious, almost threatening, expression (see Figure’s 1.2, 1.3). Her androgyny contrasts with the sensuous nursing breast adjacent to her. The image of Cahun’s face from this photo is repeated four more times in a diagonal pattern of heads that get increasingly larger as they reach the top of the photomontage. (It is repeated as well three times in the lower left of the montage, again extending down toward the corner, where it butts up against the paper doll.) In this image of Cahun, gender itself is denaturalized: Cahun is stripped of identifiable sexual characteristics, poised between two conventionalized images of femininity; Cahun as Elle is overtly masklike and conventional, but so too, Cahun suggests by the juxtaposition, is the maternal role implied by the nursing baby.

This denaturalization of maternity has multiple valences. From the perspective of personal psychology, Cahun and Moore had rejected normative heterosexual relationships and the expectations of maternity that went with them. Both women had health problems related to their reproductive organs—Cahun suffered from ovarian cysts that required surgery and Malherbe from a breast lump that turned out to be benign. Cahun’s own mother was institutionalized for much of her childhood. Clearly, then, imagining the role of motherhood was fraught with negative feelings. And the idea of motherhood was, for Cahun, far from the stable ideal proffered by the wider culture. I do not want to belabor this point, for there are too many ways in which the photomontage itself points beyond these personal issues to wider social and philosophical questions.

At around the time that Cahun and Moore were making the photomontage, Cahun was translating Havelock Ellis’s essay “La femme dans la société.” One of Ellis’s concerns was the issue of overpopulation and the necessity of birth control. While this may not have been an immediate concern for Cahun (her health made it unlikely that she could have children, and she showed no interest in mothering anyone), this did not prevent her from having a general interest in this issue. Parisian culture between the wars was rife with pronatalist propaganda encouraging women to marry and procreate. As Mary Louise Roberts points out:
Already a topic of vehement debate in the decades before the war, the ‘crisis’ of French natality became, in the words of one prominent French doctor, “the great preoccupation of thinkers, scientists and legislators” after the war. Natalist values were so ubiquitous that counter-discourses that might challenge their cultural authority were virtually non-existent. Central to this rhetoric was the natalist figure of *la mère de famille nombreuse*, the natalist mother of a large family. *La mère* was the redeemer in the same way that *la femme moderne* was a destroyer of faiths.\\(^{52}\)

Ellis offered one of the few scientific counter-discourses to the pronatalist propaganda that dominated postwar French culture, which often used the nursing mother as a symbol of renewal (Figure 1.9). Cahun described this aspect of Ellis’s writing as an important influence until the end of her life; she wrote about her interest in social issues in a letter and linked it explicitly to her aims in *Disavowals*:

> In vain, in *Disavowals* I tried as hard as I could—with black humor, provocation, defiance—to force my contemporaries out of their sanctimonious conformism, out of their complacency … Did Cassandra ever have the least chance to make her warnings known? Those, for example, formulated in the nineteenth century by the doctor-philosopher-poet Havelock Ellis. The overpopulation of the earth by the human species. This species, if it doesn’t control its natural fecundity, will perish soon despite its other victories over nature; ravaging the flora and fauna more quickly than it can cultivate and preserve them, filling space more quickly than it can acclimate itself to the deserts, it can only perish in acts of self-destruction like a fly caught in a jar (a moth in a flame). Havelock Ellis, in a book that I translated into French, proposed preventative solutions and international measures—progressive and secure social measures—against almost all the words from which we suffered.\\(^{53}\)

This letter, written after the Second World War, anticipates concerns that continue to this day, but it is striking that Cahun points back to her translation of Havelock Ellis and that she alludes particularly to aspects of his writings that questioned the natalist campaigns of the interwar years. This, together with the myriad references in the montage itself to the ways social mores are taught to girls through play (dolls and paper dolls) and children’s literature, as well as the explicit social and political implications of Cahun’s *Héroïnes* series, puts to rest any sense that this photomontage, or *Disavowals* as a whole, is merely narcissistic and self-referential. Cahun casts herself as the subject of her photomontage in order to call into question the expectations that the culture of the 1920s placed on girls and women. In the text of the chapter, Cahun explores alternatives to the heterosexual romantic paradigm.

**Romance Otherwise**

Indiscreet and brutal, I amuse myself by examining what is under the crossed-out places in my soul. There, ill-advised intentions are ravished, put to sleep; others take their place.\\(^{54}\)

In the opening paragraph of chapter I, Cahun describes a struggle between social expectations and personal desire. The chapter, she suggests, will offer a view onto this battle, a perspective that will show both the “ill-advised intentions” that constitute the “crossed-out places in [her] soul” and the other, more
appropriate desires that, once these unspeakable intentions are “ravished,” will “take their place.” The choice of words is significant: the “ill-advised intentions” are not controlled or brought into check, but rather “ravished.” The text of the chapter, like the photomontage, is about romance. A series of accounts (most in the first person) describes the struggle for different kinds of love—aesthetic, intellectual, and physical. The first of these is a monologue that addresses Cahun’s tumultuous obsession with a man called “Bob.” We learn from Cahun’s letters that “Bob” is Robert Steel, a native of the Isle of Jersey, where Cahun had summered since she was a child. Writing to a friend in 1946, Cahun described a troubling period beginning in 1917 when she developed an attraction that persisted until Bob married another woman in 1925.

However, Cahun’s texts engage not only with appropriate sexuality in relation to romance but also with the question of whether it is necessary, when trying to achieve true romantic love, to abandon one’s individuality for the sake of another. Cahun suggests that these issues are closely intertwined. For, as she made clear in “Sophie the Symbolist,” the heterosexual romantic paradigm precludes fully realized female subjectivity. Thus the text of the chapter describes not only a struggle with the expectations of heterosexual romance, but also an attempt to come to terms with romance and to imagine an interpersonal relationship that might serve as an alternative to conventional romantic paradigms, a relationship in which excessive regard for oneself, or narcissism, could be compatible with the state of love for another.

These essays complement the themes of the photomontage that introduces chapter I of *Disavowals*. Cahun and Moore engage with the question of romantic love by inserting allusions to Cahun’s brief flirtation with a heterosexual love object. The top of the photomontage is dominated by images of idealized masculinity: a fragment of Michelangelo’s *David*, a head of Jesus turned askew, and two images of Bob (Figure 1.10). Cahun described Bob as a “young man who worked in the fields and fished;” she described herself in the same letter as an “esthete” and a “transitory romantic” for whom “this boy incarnated my erotic ideal of the time. He resembled decadent Greco-Roman statues. Particularly portraits of Antinous. He had in his ferocity, his violence, his easy manner, and the clumsiness of his comportment, in the wildness that inclined him to solitude, something mysterious that irresistibly evoked Rimbaud for
Cahun’s reference to a statue of the ideal male form in the photomontage, chapter I of Disavowals and the 1946 letter resonate with another aspect of Havelock Ellis’s “Woman in Society,” which Cahun translated at around the same time she was writing the text of Disavowals. Indeed, Cahun’s engagement with Havelock Ellis’s “Woman in Society” helped her to further the deconstructive thinking that characterizes Disavowals. Perhaps even more important than Ellis’s critique of pronatalism was the way in which he questioned the ideals enforced by heterosexual romance. Indeed, in a chapter titled “The Emancipation of Women in Relation to Romantic Love” Ellis sought to denaturalize romance by tracing the history of heterosexual romance and its relationships to sexuality and reproduction. For Ellis, romance was an unnatural state; he described how paradigms of romance had shifted over time and in different historical circumstances in order to raise the question, “What will be the ultimate effect of the woman’s movement ... upon romantic love?” But whereas Ellis examines this question in academic terms, Cahun personalizes it, recounting the story of herself as a woman outside of conventional norms, and tracing the experiences with romance she undertakes.

In “Woman and Society,” Ellis offers an alternative to traditional romance by noting “the absence of romantic love in classical civilization:” “The classic civilizations of Greece and Rome in their most robust and brilliant periods knew little or nothing of romantic love in connection with normal sexual relationships culminating in marriage ... the idealization and worship of the woman by the man were not only scarcely known but, so far as they were known, reprehended or condemned.” The disjunction between love and procreation, and the idealization of love as a realm apart from marriage and family, would certainly have been of interest to Cahun. This notion was central to the writings of many homosexual male writers in the Symbolist, Aesthetic and Decadent movements whom Cahun admired. In the photomontage, one of the strongest influences on Cahun, her uncle Marcel Schwob, is depicted as a young man, dressed in a cravat, and looking a bit like Oscar Wilde two-thirds of the way down on the left. In the upper-right corner, on a diagonal of faces linked to him, we see an image of Bob.

Cahun described her relationship with Bob as a flirtation in which she played the role of intellectual—introducing him to the writings of Wilde and Rimbaud (two of those Symbolist poets)—and “he spoke of his adventurous desire to leave for America, Canada.” Her relationship with Bob lasted several years but went nowhere. While pursuing him, she “resolved to learn to grow tomatoes” and “spent time—as a tourist—with Bob’s family.” This relationship was apparently the closest Cahun came to a traditional heterosexual romance. Her narrative has certain characteristics of the common romance—the idealization of the loved one and a class difference that dooms the relationship to failure—but there are also aspects of it that veer from traditional romance. For it is Cahun, the woman, who is teaching Bob about poetry, and not the other way around. Wilde, Verlaine and Rimbaud, moreover, are hardly the kinds of authors that proper young girls were encouraged to read: the poetry she introduced Bob to came from a homosexual context, not a heterosexual romantic one. (Cahun had many family connections to the Symbolist movement and many opportunities to read such works in the library of her father’s newspaper, the Phare de la Loire.)
Cahun’s description of her obsession with Bob begins with a relatively straightforward narrative describing the use of tobacco and alcohol to numb the pain of the obsession (practices more commonly associated with male characters in love stories). Almost immediately, however, we are given clues that a struggle is under way between social expectations and internal desires. As Cahun “thinks of Bob,” her “cheeks are lined by false dimples—false, but rather well imitated.”\textsuperscript{60} This assumption of an artifice of emotion is evoked in the center of the photomontage by the figure of Cahun as “Elle”—the completely denaturalized character from the Birot theater piece—who had hearts painted on in the place of dimples. Cahun describes herself thinking of Bob as resembling the pose assumed by an actor on the stage.

Further on in the text, Cahun makes specific reference both to the context of fairytales (which she had already explored in \textit{Héroïnes}) and to the notion of role playing: “My hardened face sees itself harden. Masks my weakness.” She continues, describing herself as playing the role of a prince and imagining in that role a false nobility: “I had been Prince a little while ago and am unable to daydream about it without simulated nobility … Nobility! And still Bob.”\textsuperscript{61} Cahun’s dallying with a heterosexual fairytale romance turns the tables on the conventional story, for if she is a prince, then her “romance” with Bob is closer to the ideals of homosexual love than those of fairytale romance. In her descriptions of her obsession with Bob, Cahun described Antinous as her “sexual ideal,” yet Antinous was famously the homosexual lover of the emperor Hadrian. Thus Cahun inserts herself into the romantic structure not as a woman but as a homosexual man. Yet even this alternative vision of love is, for Cahun, a masquerade in which she tries on different romantic roles. She compares Bob to Rimbaud, thus putting herself in the position of Verlaine, the Symbolist poet who was Rimbaud’s lover. By evoking Rimbaud and Verlaine, Cahun imagines playing the role of Symbolist as a means of sidestepping cultural expectations of mainstream society just as Sophie had done in “Sophie the Symbolist.”

In imagining herself as a homosexual man and a Symbolist, Cahun shifts her “romantic adventure” away from traditional paradigms. Even before she wrote \textit{Héroïnes} and \textit{Disavowals}—indeed, during the period when she was courting Bob—Cahun had written two works that assumed the perspective of a homosexual male Symbolist or Aesthete. One of them, \textit{Vues et visions}, was composed of prose poems reminiscent of Decadent writers, evoking parallels between mundane views of the seaside retreat of Le Croisic, which Cahun and Malherbe frequented in the summers with their families, and various imagined sites in the ancient world—Rome, Arcadia, Alexandria, Corinth, and even “Paris Néo-Grec”—where homosexual love was an accepted social practice.\textsuperscript{62} Cahun also explored this interest in Aestheticism, Symbolism and Dandyism in the unpublished manuscript \textit{Jeux Uraniens}, which took up the theme of homosexual love as the ideal, spiritual encounter between two friends.\textsuperscript{63} As Tirza Latimer notes, Cahun’s “homophile reconstruction of antiquity” in these texts was part of a wider “classical revival [that] took a specifically Sapphic turn in the first decades of the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{64}

In chapter I of \textit{Disavowals} and the photomontage that introduces the chapter, Cahun explores and deconstructs the function of the romantic adventure by juxtaposing tropes of conventional heterosexual romance with the Aestheticist
Reading Claude Cahun's *Disavowals*

Notion of “spiritual” or “intellectual” love as well as her own struggles to break free of these paradigms. Cahun, it seems, was trying to imagine an alternative role she might play as an individual who is in love, but not romantically subservient. In a sense, she is asking a question similar to Havelock Ellis’s: “What will be the effect of the woman’s movement on romantic love?” While Cahun was not specifically addressing the institutional structure of the women’s movement, she was sympathetic to the basic tenets described by Ellis: “The ideal of the weak, ignorant, inexperienced woman—the cross between an angel and an idiot, as I have elsewhere described her,” said Ellis “—no longer fulfilled any useful purpose. Civilized society furnishes the conditions under which all adult persons are socially equal and all are free to give to society the best they are capable of.” Refusing to be the angel or the idiot, Cahun tried to imagine love between social equals by juxtaposing conventional tropes (heterosexual romance), alternative tropes (homophile romance), and her own struggles to choose what story she would play out. In imagining alternatives to conventional heterosexual romance, Cahun seems most comfortable donning the mask of a homosexual male Aesthete/Symbolist—more powerful, perhaps, than any form of woman by virtue of his gender.

However, interspersed with these meditations on the struggle to define her own desire, and the suggestion that this involves a pantomime of expected emotions and preordained roles, is a more intimate voice that, rather than describing the encounter with various lovers, addresses the lover directly. One such example erupts in the midst of Cahun’s meditations:

Bob ... an intellectual love, in truth. Who would have believed it?—Who? Who would I want to make believe it? You know it: it is to you that I must justify myself, exaggerate. Your absence is fictional. One cannot rid oneself so easily of fifteen years of intimacy with a little tobacco and alcohol. In vain I try not to say your name, my regular witness (témoin familial).

This is the first of many moments in the text where what seems to be in interior monologue shifts its address and directs itself outward to speak to another lover. The “you” of the text replaces “Bob,” and Cahun’s address becomes earnest rather than pantomimed. When Cahun addresses “you” directly, however, she is speaking to her stepsister and long-time lover and partner, Suzanne Malherbe (Marcel Moore, who had helped her make the photomontages). That the “you” she refers to is Suzanne is indicated by the “fifteen years of intimacy” as well as the use of the term “familier,” which can mean “regular” but also a member of the family. We have, then, the sense of an internal struggle in which the narrator is torn between a script she is attempting to follow (the false dimpled lover’s smile addressed to Bob) and the unraveling of that role as she imagines addressing her longtime partner, her “témoin familier,” Suzanne. Cahun follows the heterosexual romantic script, pining for Bob, but her long and intimate connection with Suzanne intervenes.

There is nothing simple or straightforward about Cahun’s love for Moore. It is long and deep, but while it offers an alternative to conventionally gendered romance, it still raises the same questions that arise in any kind of relationship: how does one negotiate the boundaries and the bonds between self and other? How will the couple present itself to the world?
The next section of the essay begins with a marked shift in tone, a certainty about love, and, here again, Cahun seems to be addressing Suzanne Malherbe. She acknowledges her love for Suzanne, while conceding the dilemmas raised by this concrete acknowledgment. The text involves the reader in a complicated play of language between the familiar and the formal, the individual and the plural, which parallels the dilemmas of giving oneself up to love:

I love you. [Je t’aime] That ought to be enough for the whole solar system. I love you [Je vous aime].

Oh! This shameful plural, little prostituted soul. Does it [the soul] think that the verb gains a greater force of conviction from [the plural]? Soul? The bitch! She is less pure than my body ... (You will have already come to that conclusion. Pardon me: I have a slow mind ... and strong flesh!), and more feminine. What can I do with it? Wear it out.67

This text involves a complex play on the overlap in French between the plural “vous” and the formal “vous.” We cannot be sure whether the shift from the singular object “je t’aime” to “je vous aime” means that the writer is taking a more formal tone or has suddenly begun addressing more than one listener. The exclamation “Oh! this shameful plural [pluriel]” suggests multiple lovers listening (Cahun could have written about shameful politesse or formality if she wanted a clear reference to formality). On the other hand, it might also be read as a comment expressing ambivalence about the very notion of the couple—of being plural (part of a couple) rather than singular (self-sufficient, alone). This explanation is reinforced by the following paragraph, which reads: “Individualism? Narcissism? Certainly. It’s my best tendency, the only intentional fidelity of which I am capable. You (tu—familiar) don’t care. I was lying before: I scatter myself too widely for that.”68 On the one hand, we are given a contrast between a duality or plural in the couple and the claim to “individualism” and “narcissism” the concern only with the self. This marks a shift in the text from imagining the various roles one might play in love, to struggling with the very notion of committing oneself to another. On the other hand, the claim that the narrator “scatters herself too widely” has multiple valences—suggesting a loss of self as well as the notion that one bond must dissolve so that others can be pursued.

Finally, this section of text ends with a statement that erases all conventional models of love in which one participant dominates the other, and seems to propose an alternative:

I can believe in the impossible, for example: That God, you, and I are one and the same, that hell, heaven, and my sheets are joined together, that the instant, the eternal, my long and my brief words are (for those who know how to say them/understand them) one and the same word.69

This passage is the first instance in which Cahun begins to formulate an alternative form of subjectivity and with it a new form of love relationship in which “you and I are one and the same.”

The theme of the couple imagined in a new form is taken up again a few pages later, when Cahun quotes from a letter she wrote to Malherbe during the period of her obsession with Bob. Dated “Jersey, 20 September 1920 (Letter),” the letter...
describes the “pointless conquest” Cahun has come to undertake. Toward the end, she reverts to addressing the letter’s recipient, Suzanne, directly. Cahun presumably is addressing her lover, Moore/Malherbe, and imagining that their relationship, both artistic and intimate, might serve as a model for an alternative kind of love:

Sweet, nevertheless,... the moment when our two heads leaned together over a photograph (ah! How our hair would meld indistinguishably). Portrait of one or the other, our two narcissisms drowning there, it was the impossible realized in a magic mirror. The exchange, the superimposition, the fusion of desires. The unity of the image achieved through the close friendship of two bodies—even if they send their souls to the devil!

Postscriptum: at present I exist otherwise.70

Notes


3 Ibid.

4 I am greatly indebted to François Leperlier’s research on Cahun, which appears in his two comprehensive and insightful critical biographies: *Claude Cahun: L’écart et la métamorphose* (Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1992); and *Claude Cahun: L’exotisme intérieur* (Paris: Fayard, 2006). The quotation is from Leperlier, *Claude Cahun: L’exotisme intérieur*, 183.


8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.


15 Birot quoted in Latimer, “‘Acting Out’” in Downie, Don’t Kiss Me, 65.

16 Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 486.


20 Given that Disavowals and Femme 100 têtes were both published by Éditions du Carrefour, it is quite possible that Ernst and Cahun were aware of each other’s work with montage. Cahun was a great admirer of Ernst, and we can surmise that she was an avid follower of his work. According to Leperlier (L’exotisme intérieur, 106), Cahun and Moore’s apartment was decorated with two works by Ernst (one a large photomontage). In “Confidences au miroir” (Cahun, Écrits, 593), Cahun reports that when she did not have enough money to buy a painting in the Surrealist gallery, she instead bought a “photo by Max Ernst: La vierge flagellée.” This seems to be a reference to Ernst’s controversial painting of 1926, The Blessed Virgin Chastises the Christ Child before Three Witnesses: A.B., P.E. and the Artist. The reversal of terms here, where, in Cahun’s title, the Virgin is the one who is beaten, might be a witty allusion to Cahun’s outsider status among the group during the 1920s.


22 Since the 1880s, French girls had been educated by the state, and in 1924 the same baccalauréat syllabus prescribed for boys was mandated to be taught to girls, which facilitated their entrance into universities and pursuit of higher degrees. By the 1920s approximately 80 percent of women could read. See Milligan, The Forgotten Generation, 25–6.


24 Leperlier, Claude Cahun: L’exotisme, 17.


For a discussion of these essays, see Katherine Conley, “Claude Cahun’s Counter-Archival Héroïnes,” in Downie, Don’t Kiss Me, 24–31.

27 See Cahun, Héroïnes, ed. Leperlier, 81, n. 1. The heroines most closely aligned with Cahun herself were “Sophie the Symbolist,” “Sappho the Misunderstood” and “Androgyne, Heroine of Heroines.” “Androgyne,” while initially written as part of the essay series, was ultimately published in an expanded form as part of Aveux non avenus.


29 Mme la Comtesse de Ségur (née Rostopchine), Les Malheurs de Sophie (Paris: Hachette, 1858), 5.

30 Ibid.

31 Ferdinand Brunetière was one of the leading intellectuals to attack the Symbolists. For a discussion of this nineteenth-century debate, see Jennifer L. Shaw, Dream States: Puvis de Chavannes, Modernism and the Fantasy of France (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).


35 Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 153.

36 Comtesse de Ségur, Les Malheurs de Sophie, 7–9.

37 Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 153.

38 Cahun would engage in explicit and lengthy explorations of narcissism in Aveux non avenus (1930). For discussions of this concept in the writings of Cahun as well as in the wider psychological and sexological culture of the 1920s see Latimer, Women Together/Women Apart and Jennifer L. Shaw, “Narcissus and the Magic Mirror,” in Downie, Don’t Kiss Me, 33–45.


40 Ibid., 154.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 153.

44 Ibid., 651.


46 Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 154.

47 Ibid.
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55 Cahun to Gaston Ferdière, March 1946, in *Écrits*, 674.


58 Thanks to François Leperlier for helping me to correctly identify this figure.


61 Ibid.

62 Originally published under the pseudonym Claude Courlis in the *Mercure de France* in 1914, and reissued as a book illustrated by Moore in an edition of 460 copies by Éditions Georges Crès in 1919. In 1939, when dedicating a copy of the book she gave to Jaqueline Lamba Breton, Cahun wrote “Si c’était Claude, en ce temps-là, d’est de cette façon qu’elle jouait aux versions latines et aux dissertations françaises. Après des heures exceptionnelles, des jours mystérieux d’année bissextile durant lesquels il me fut donné de me défaire (si tard que sans l’humour on aurait du mal à s’en tirer) des alibis, travestissements et armures, il peut sembler absurde d’en choisir pour témoignage ce texte compassé, ces hypocrites appels de courlis dans la nuit. Mais grâce à l’eau de l’air, je ne sais quel mot, quelle phrase, quelle parenthèse, quel signe de papier jauni s’ouvrira comme une fleur japonaise au cœur de l’aquarium, au centre de l’œil prodigieux de Psyché.”

63 Unpublished typescript, Jersey Heritage Trust. Excerpts reproduced under the title *Amor amicitiae*, in *Écrits*, 489–95. The title *Jeux Uraniens* refers both to André Gide’s *Le voyage d’Urien* (1893) and to “uranien,” the term used in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to denote homosexuality.


69 Ibid.

NARCISSUS AND THE MAGIC MIRROR

Self-love.

A hand clenched on a mirror—a mouth, palpitating nostrils—between swooning eyelids, the crazy fixity of enlarged pupils ... in the brutal view of an electric light in blond, lilac, and green, under the stars, here is everything ... that I would like to illuminate of the mystery: the neo-narcissism of a practical humanity.

My picture would be of this sensual and hypocritical period when people prefer their own contact and its mute disdain to the chatty love of others ... One might contrast morals and other loves with this picture.1

The mirror plays a central part in the imagery and texts of *Disavowals*. A medium for the exploration of self and an emblem of the photographic process, the mirror allows for meditations on many of the book’s central concerns. And nowhere is the theme of self-reflection more prominent than in chapter II of *Disavowals*, titled “Myself, for lack of a better term” (“Moi-Même [faute de mieux]”) and subtitled “the Siren gives in to her own voice” (“La sirène succombe à sa propre voix”). The photomontage that opens the chapter is, once again, structured around images of Cahun (Figure 2.1). Top and center, a photograph of Cahun is set within a drawing of a hand-mirror. The hand that holds the mirror is oriented as if the viewer were holding the mirror up to herself and seeing Cahun’s face reflected in it. However, the reflection in the mirror obscures more than it shows. The surface of the mirror is almost entirely black save for a glimpse of the reflected figure’s eyes: what is visible suggests a mask. What is more, the figure of Cahun in the mirror holds up a hand in a similar orientation to the hand below, only reversed. This creates a complicated play where the mirrored reflection and the mask oscillate. This emphasis on the difficult relation between the gaze, the self and the image is reinforced at the bottom of the photomontage, where a huge graphically rendered eye stares out at the viewer. At its center, an inverted photo image of Cahun gives the impression that the large figure implied by the eye is looking out of the photomontage at Cahun. The photomontage thus sets up a comparison between the “I” of the self, the “I’s” reflected in the mirrors of the glass and the eyeball, and the “eye” that perceives the image of the self. Does the photomontage present an image of Cahun seen by an Other? The image of Cahun seeing herself? Neither explanation seems to fit.
2.1 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Faceplate for Chapter II entitled Moi-Même (Myself) in Aveux non avenus, 1930.
In addition to emphasizing the notion of self-reflection, the photomontage insistently calls attention to its elements as fragmentary. The masklike fragment of a face in the mirror resonates with the body fragments that are inserted at the margins of the photomontage. Their fragmentary nature is emphasized by the black background. At the top corners, photographs of arms and shoulders echo the corners of the frame. The arms reach up to the sides of the neck in something of a self-embrace, but the shoulders are separated by the large circle of the mirror, which appears to take the place of the torso, or perhaps even the heart. The physical body appears shifted to the margins by the predominance of the mysterious reflection of the self. The legs at the right and the arms in the
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top corner are cut out from an image of Cahun sitting on a quilt, knees forward, feet back at each side, arms covering her breasts, hands on her shoulders (Figure 2.2). She poses her limbs so that sexual characteristics are masked, and with her head shaved and her face masked her gender is initially not altogether clear. Similarly, in the photomontage the parts of the body that have been relegated to the margins do not reveal gender. Neither does the masked face. Yet, as we shall see, the question of gender and its relationship to mirroring is extremely important to this photomontage.

Two other fragments of the body play important roles in the composition. First, at the far-right center, a graphically rendered hand appears to push on the lower edge of the hand-mirror, implying the instability of the composition; one has the sense that the mirror, with its reflection, might be moved out of the frame of the photomontage if the pressure from this hand overpowers the hand that holds on to the mirror. Second, a hand enters the composition from the upper margin at the right and points to the center of the circle formed by the hand-mirror’s frame. This hand is a clipping of pages from chapter II of *Disavowals*, and an excerpt of text from the chapter is completely legible. This hand and the other sections of cut-out paper inserted into the photomontage thus invite the reader to refer back and forth between image and text. The fragmentary and the intertextual are thus emphasized here as connected to the story of self-love proffered in this chapter.

In the subtitle, “The siren gives in to her own voice,” Cahun plays upon the ancient mythology of the seductive siren, but turns it into an emblem of “self-love,” a theme that arises repeatedly throughout the chapter. The opening lines of the chapter respond to the title and subtitle by retelling the story of the siren: “The sailors are too occupied with manoeuvring their vessels and the songs of their own flesh. The siren is the only victim of the siren.” From the outset of chapter II, the conventional gender roles inhabited on a voyage of discovery are upended. The male sailors are no longer drawn on their voyage by the song of the female siren; rather the siren is drawn, by her own voice, into a journey of self-discovery. Thus the subtitle to the chapter proposes a female protagonist, a siren, who rather than singing to seduce men at sea, sings for herself. In doing so, she transforms her traditional role as a seducer of men into the role of a creator of song for its own sake—into an artist. But why, then, would the title also indicate that the term “myself” doesn’t seem quite adequate, that the word “myself” is used only for lack of a better term?

The answer to this question unfolds in the interrelationship between the photomontage that opens the chapter and the text with which the photomontage is in dialogue. Some of the strongest clues are to be found in a section of chapter II that seems most closely connected to the imagery of the photomontage. For here Cahun proposes not narcissism but something she calls “neo-narcissism” and asks the reader to imagine a culture that, rather than being composed of narcissists who “prefer their own contact” is instead made up of “other loves.” This proposed “neo-narcissism” is closely connected to what I called in the introduction to this book “intersubjectivity.” Rather than offering a clear definition of “neo-narcissism” in her images or texts, however, Cahun takes her reader on a journey exploring the issues associated with Narcissus, from the literary to the psychological, hinting at the power and the weaknesses
associated with the narcissistic cultivation of self and proposing, if obliquely, possible alternatives.

The connections between the image and the text from chapter II that I quoted in the epigraph are many—some of them straightforward—such as the “hand clenched on a mirror” or “the swooning eyelids” and “enlarged pupils” that seem to be depicted in the top half of the montage; others are less so. The text’s reference to a “neo-narcissism” is as cryptic as its allusion to “other morals and other loves.” And the montage that engages its viewers in the pursuit of these alternatives—these morals and other loves—is far from straightforward. It invites its viewers into a dialogue, solicits many different readings, and connects not only to passages in the chapter that immediately follows it, but also to many sections of the book from beginning to end. Underlying these interrelationships between image and text is an attempt to envision an alternative to the dominant conceptions of subjectivity and creativity based on paradigms of heterosexual romantic love discussed in our analysis of chapter I of Disavowals. As the book develops in chapter II, Narcissus and the mirror become central motifs for the deconstruction of contemporary ideas about self and representation; “neo-narcissism” is Cahun’s name for the alternative vision of self that she seeks.

From the outset, Cahun framed Disavowals as an alternative to dominant ideas about self-reflection. The book’s public face, as well as its text and images, makes that clear. The front cover (see Figure 0.1) and back cover (Figure 2.3) of Disavowals immediately announce the themes of reflection and self-interrogation that define the myth of Narcissus. The title “Aveux” (“avowals” or “confessions”) suggests self-revelation. However, the “confessions” are made “null and void” by their modifiers “non avenus.” The layout of the front cover visually mimics this promise and refusal of self-reflection, for the words of the title are juxtaposed symmetrically, as if refracted in a series of intersecting mirrors. The initial illusion of symmetry is interrupted, however, by the visual play of similarity and difference between the words “Aveux” and “Avenus.” The cover thus visually proposes an initial impression of mirrored reflection, only to withdraw it with red intersecting “nons” and through the word “aveux” links that mirroring to the self. On the back cover, the title describes a self-enclosed circle, with “Claude Cahun” projecting inward toward a tiny “c” at the center. Elements within the text suggest that Cahun and Moore intended the circle to be a metaphor for the inward-focused, self-interrogating project of self-contemplation. Yet as the viewer follows Cahun’s name toward the center, it refuses the conventional role of the initial as a declaration of self and threatens instead to disappear. These two figures, the mirror and the circle projecting toward the center, are treated in a variety of ways in both the text and images of chapter II of Disavowals.

The story of Narcissus—the youth who dies of love for his own reflection—and his counterpart, Echo—whose love for Narcissus is expressed through her repetition of his words—has a long
history in the visual and literary arts. Perhaps more than any other theme in *Disavowals*, Narcissus draws together a series of intersecting debates of the 1920s ranging from the psychological to the sexological to the literary. As Tirza Latimer has observed, narcissism was linked in the popular imagination with femininity and with lesbianism: “In the era of the modern woman, the thematic of narcissistic femininity, especially literary and pictorial images that relied on the mirror as a prop, proliferated hysterically.” According to Latimer, in addition to being an emblem of female vanity, the image of the woman entranced by her own reflection “played a pivotal role in modern constructions of homosexual as well as female sexuality.” The figure of Narcissus was introduced into psychoanalytic discourse in 1898 by Havelock Ellis, whose *Woman in Society* Cahun had translated for publication in French in 1929. Ellis linked the potential for the “sexual emotions to be absorbed, and often entirely lost in self-admiration” to women and “feminine-minded men.” In 1914, Sigmund Freud’s essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” explicitly linked male homosexuality with narcissism, stating that “We have discovered, especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as perverts and homosexuals, that in their later choice of love objects they have taken as a model not only their mother, but their own selves.” To the extent that Narcissus has figured in discussions of Cahun, the theme has been seen in relation to late twentieth-century theory as the key to Cahun’s own narcissistic psychology, as the sign of a regressive vision of homosexuality or, perhaps, most interestingly, as a symbol of self-reflection tied to the pre-Oedipal maternal. Although I focus in this chapter on the relationships between the figure of Narcissus and literary Symbolism, Narcissus will return later in this book, when I discuss Cahun’s engagement with explorations of sexuality current in the 1920s, including Freudian psychoanalysis, notions of the androgyne or third sex, and Gide’s meditations on homosexuality in *Corydon*.

Cahun and the Symbolist Narcissus

Why was Cahun so interested in Narcissus? From one perspective, Cahun’s deployment of Narcissus in *Disavowals* was an attempt to update and critique explorations of subjectivity that had been undertaken by the writers she most valued in her youth—those affiliated with literary Symbolism. From an early age, Cahun viewed the Symbolists as models for her own artistic project. She found examples of the Symbolist artist/poets in her own family and their associates. Her uncle, Maurice Schwob, was a respected Symbolist poet. Cahun’s upbringing, and her unusual education, provided the opportunity for her to explore the literary legacy of Symbolism to which she imagined herself as heir. Significantly for Cahun, Schwob and several of the most prominent Symbolist poets were homosexual. Cahun’s early writings, which I discussed in Chapter 1, were experiments with Symbolism and Aestheticism. Yet, by the time she wrote the texts of *Disavowals*, she had moved beyond writing in a Symbolist mode; she wanted instead to rethink many of the ideas and subjects that she found in Symbolism and transform them into productive concepts of her own.
Rethinking the myth of Narcissus offered the perfect opportunity to do this. Many of the Symbolist poets whom she admired, including André Gide and Rémy de Gourmont, had composed their own versions of the myth of Narcissus. For them, Narcissus was the quintessential artist who used self-exploration as the material for his work. Second, Narcissus engages with mirroring, which is substantively connected to the practice of photography in which Cahun and Moore were engaged. Third, the story of Narcissus is a story of love, and Cahun was interested in reimagining love relations outside of the traditional romantic paradigm. Finally, rethinking narcissism enabled her to counter the negative readings of femininity and homosexuality as narcissistic personality disorders that were prevalent in the 1920s. If Cahun was looking for a story to rewrite, she could not have found one that brought more of her interests together.

In essays such as André Gide’s “Traité du Narcisse,” Rémy de Gourmont’s “Dernière conséquence de l’idéalisme” and Camille Mauclair’s Euleusis: Causeries sur la cité intérieur, Narcissus represented the male artist/poet whose work derived from a pursuit of absolute self-knowledge. In their reimaginings of the myth, the Symbolists explored the obstacles to the knowledge and possession of the self through art. These obstacles to Narcissus’ “primordial absolutism” were posed by his dependence on external self-reflections—in the mirroring pool and in the thought of the Other (represented by Echo). The Symbolist exploration of Narcissus thus posited an absolute self who would be the source of creation but went on to undo the notion that male subjectivity was autonomous. According to Symbolist writers, creating the work of art required unceasing self-contemplation even when faced with the impossibility of ever fully knowing the self. Out of this self-exploration, the work of art would be created. The task of the artist was thus an impossible narcissistic struggle that must nonetheless be continually pursued.8 Both Cahun and Symbolist writers such as André Gide were surely interested not only in Narcissus’ connection to the issue of human subjectivity but also in the potentially homosexual aspects of the myth.

In Disavowals we read explicit meditations on Narcissus that evoke many of the tropes embedded in André Gide’s “Treatise on Narcissus” (1892). In that essay, Gide’s Narcissus looks into the glassy waters of the river “Time” in order “to finally know the shape of his soul.” As he meditates, Narcissus regresses to the origins of subjectivity. He dreams that he is Adam sheltering under a “logarithmic tree” in an Edenic paradise where “Forms flower only once”—where, like “God’s most perfect Form,” everything is both perfect and necessary.9 “Unique” and “still unsexed,” Adam is the source and center of everything that surrounds him: “Always the necessary spectator of a spectacle in which he has no role but to be the one who watches.”10 Narcissus’ dream soon turns away from this Edenic harmony. For in his search for an absolute in which everything is transparent to him because it, in a sense, is him, Adam has lost the ability to see and express himself. Eventually, Narcissus/Adam realizes his dilemma: “a little gesture, in order to know,” he says, “a dissonance.” When his desire to intervene overtakes him and he breaks a bough of the tree, “an imperceptible crack first, a cry.” With this fissure in the original harmony, says Gide, “time is born.”11 Narcissus returns to consciousness of looking into the river. His understanding of the self and its relationship to the surrounding world is confused by the river’s flow.12 Any grasp of “the real,” Gide implies, is inevitably subject to the modification of temporality
and is therefore momentary, contingent and imperfect. Then, “terror-stricken Man, androgyne who divides in two, cr[ies] with anguish and horror, sensing spring in him a new sex.” A break between moments, a cry, the differentiation of sex: Narcissus/Adam's intervention brings with it the division of the self in time, language and gender: the characteristics of subjectivity structured by desire. Gide's image of human subjectivity in his rewriting of this myth thus emphasizes the fragmentary and partial nature of self-understanding, and his essay presages twentieth-century accounts of the unraveling or decentering of subjectivity. Throughout Disavowals, Cahun takes up Gide's contrast between the prelapsarian timeless absolute and the effect of the partiality of time on human beings. We might also see these themes reflected in the multivalent format of the front and back covers of Aveux non avenus, the form of a cross on the front of the book, and, on the back, the image of a clock with hands.

Ultimately, however, Gide finds a way to move beyond this partiality by renouncing desire and renouncing his own individuality. He is thus stuck in a dialectic of self-absorption and self-dissolution. When Narcissus wakes from his dream about Eden, he attempts unsuccessfully to reclaim that original harmony—to find in nature “something finally stable and that endures.” How, then, will he create his Art? Gide proposes a solution to this dilemma. Narcissus must take up the role of Adam, renounce his desire, and allow things to appear to him. Looking into the reflecting pool, “Narcissus tells himself that the kiss is impossible: one must not desire an image; one gesture to possess it destroys it. He is alone—what to do? Contemplate ... leaning over the appearance of the world, [he] feels vaguely reabsorbed in himself the human generations that pass.” Here, Gide’s Narcissus becomes the emblem of the artist, and the work of art is produced through self-contemplation.

Rémy de Gourmont focused to a larger extent than did Gide on the role of the Other in processes of mirroring that structure human subjectivity. In “The Last Consequence of Idealism” (1894), Gourmont used the figure of Narcissus to explore the elements of human subjectivity that are obstacles to absolute self-knowledge of the kind Gide had examined. Narcissus’ sense of self, suggests Gourmont, is dependent upon seeing himself mirrored in reflections. But Gourmont is not just describing a physical mirror. Instead Gourmont describes a psychological mirroring. He claims that human self-understanding is conditioned by the way we imagine others see us: “The thought of the other is the mirror itself of Narcissus, and without it he would be eternally ignorant. He loves himself because he has seen himself; we see ourselves mirrored, in eyes, in the lake of exterior thought.” Here Gourmont makes a rhetorical move from the Narcissus of myth to the impersonal pronoun “on” (we/one), which suggests that Narcissus’ situation is emblematic of the human condition. We see ourselves mirrored by physical reflections, by emotional reflections in the eyes of a lover or a foe, by our own notions of what others think of us. In the myth, the person who mirrors is represented by the nymph Echo, the female nymph who was punished with the loss of her voice by the goddess Juno. She was not able to speak for herself, only to repeat the words of others. Echo fell in love with Narcissus, but was spurned by him and wasted away until all that was left was her voice endlessly repeating Narcissus’ words back to him. Now, Echo had become another kind of mirror, like the pool into which Narcissus gazes.
In the myth of Narcissus, and in Gourmont’s account, Echo is merely a cipher with no subjectivity of her own. Because she cannot speak for herself but can only repeat Narcissus’ last phrase, Echo is ultimately the creation of Narcissus: “By listening, he creates Echo. Echo is the thought that allows him to live: he negates her and he dies.” According to Gourmont, Narcissus’ dependence on Echo—his dependence on his flawed understanding of the thoughts of others rather than his own internal memories or understanding of himself—is the greatest obstacle to what Narcissus seeks. Gourmont’s Narcissus desires a self not dependent on others or on reflections from the outside for self-knowledge, but only on himself. Gourmont calls Narcissus’ desired state “primordial absolutism.” And the dilemma posed by the search for the absolute in the self is central to chapter II of Disavowals.

From the very beginning of the chapter, Cahun rewrites the roles of Narcissus and of Echo, imagining them both in relation to the female voice. The opening title, we should recall, is “Moi-Même” (myself), and its subtitle is also a claim: “The siren succumbs to her own voice.” It opens, that is to say, with a reversal of the role that the female and her voice play in the Narcissus myth. Throughout Disavowals Cahun engages with the figure of Narcissus and the idea of individual self-absorption. She sees her struggle as related to, though not exactly identical with, what Gourmont calls the pursuit of “primordial absolutism.” Sometimes the reference is explicit, even including the dynamic between self-absorption and self-dissolution we just saw in Gide’s Narcissus. For example, Cahun writes: “Individualism? Narcissism? Certainly. My best characteristic, the one intentional fidelity I am capable of. You don’t care? I’m lying anyway: I scatter myself too widely for that.” Furthermore, in chapter II of Disavowals, Cahun offers an image of inward-turning self-exploration, an attempt in dream to escape the contingencies of the body and the physical world, much like Narcissus’ dream in Gide’s text. Cahun’s dream narrative, however, is specifically female. Cahun writes:

I close my eyes in order to bound off the orgy. There is too much of everything. I keep silent. I hold my breath. I curl up in a ball, I give up my boundaries, I fold myself toward an imaginary center ... I have my head shaved, my teeth pulled and my breasts cut off—everything that bothers my gaze or slows it down—my stomach, my ovaries, the conscious and encysted brain. When I have but one card left in my hand, only the beating of my heart to note to perfection, surely I will have won.

Cahun’s female narrator enters a meditative state like Gide’s Narcissus and attempts, also like Gide’s Narcissus, to becomes “unique” and “unsexed.” However, whereas Gide’s Narcissus imagines an Edenic scene prior to sexual differentiation, Cahun imagines a violent stripping away of the contingencies that make her a woman—breasts and ovaries—in order to return to a primordial state that might allow her to remake the self. Both Gide and Cahun wrestle with the problems that arise from narcissistic self-contemplation, where turning inward in dream detaches one so much from the world that one loses the capacity to create. Gide’s Narcissus ultimately loses himself, “vaguely reabsorbed in the generations that pass.” In contrast, Cahun’s protagonist, stripped of bodily contingencies and “fold[ing] toward an imaginary center” until there is nothing left but “the beating of my heart,” immediately recognizes that this effort of imagination can never deliver what she seeks. The passage continues: “Post-mortem—No. Even then, even reduced to nothing, I will understand nothing. No
better off. He who cannot swallow the whole cannot swallow a little piece.” The “tendency to push toward the absolute” says Cahun, is a tendency to push “to the absurd.” This last phrase points to the crux of Cahun’s critique of her Symbolist progenitors and to a wider theme of the book. For she acknowledges both the desire for the absolute (or, in Gourmont’s words, “primordial absolutism”)—for a self not subject to human frailties—and the impossibility of this desire. For both Cahun and Gide, the struggle for the absolute in the self is primary. However, unlike Gide, Cahun emphasizes how such absolute standards violate one’s sense of self. In this chapter, she leads the reader through the struggles of Narcissus in order to demonstrate the difficulties of pursuing such an ideal. There are, of course, many differences between Cahun’s text and Gide’s that we must take into account. In the dream text we have just examined, Cahun’s language is highly embodied and suggests self-objectification, violence and masochism.

While the structure of Cahun’s meditation is informed by Gide’s Symbolist Narcissus, the rhetoric here seems closer to the Surrealists’ hero, Isadore Ducasse, or, as he called himself, the Comte de Lautréamont. His Les Chants de Maldoror (1868–69), with its ironic language, parody of conventional ideas and modes of writing, and violent bodily rhetoric, became a touchstone for writers and artists in the early twentieth century. Like Cahun’s Disavowals, Lautréamont’s book also grapples with the dilemmas of “our impotence and passion to attain the infinite by even the maddest means.”21 Much of Lautréamont’s text is full of violent, evocative imagery even more extreme than Cahun’s, and this imagery, like Cahun’s, appears in the context of a quest for what he calls “the infinite.” However, although the wrenching corporeal imagery of Cahun’s text has affinities with Maldoror, she uses this rhetoric to put pressure on the Narcissus myth as it had been interpreted by Symbolist writers and to push against the association made in conventional culture between narcissism, femininity and homosexuality.

Cahun was thinking about the imagery of this dream narrative in relation to Narcissus in a photographic context. The series of photomontages produced during the same period when these texts were probably written—1927–28—play with the imagery of Narcissus. In one, Cahun takes a single image, reverses it, and combines the images along a central axis to produce a bilateral symmetry that makes the pictured rock mimic a human torso (Figure 2.4). Cahun’s face becomes a heart, an image that seems connected to the beating heart of Cahun’s dream. (“When I have but one card left in my hand, only the beating of my heart to note to perfection, surely I will have won.”) Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this photomontage is what it leaves out: Cahun’s own naked body, all but her head submerged in the water, as we see in another version of the photomontage and in the original print on which it was based (Figure’s 2.5, 2.6). In a pose that is an inversion of the classic imagery of Narcissus—the youth, leaning over the pool, gazing with rapt attention—Cahun floats, eyes closed, in the water, her face placed in front of a mute, unreflective stone in what appears to be a refutation of the Narcissus myth. That Cahun saw these images in relation to the theme of Narcissus is made even clearer when we look at another photograph that takes up the theme of Narcissus, in which she explicitly poses as Narcissus on the edge of the pool (Figure 2.8). However, as Latimer points out, Cahun’s Narcissus turns away from the reflecting water. What is more, two of these images show Cahun’s
naked body bound in what appears to be seaweed, but could also be understood as black wire or rope, which we might see as an expression of entrapment posed by the dilemma of Narcissus, or even as a sado-masochistic reference reminiscent of Lautréamont’s *Maldoror* and presaging some Surrealist photography. In yet another twist, while it is true that in these images Cahun turns away from the water that might serve as a mirror, she also uses the potential reversals of the photographic negative to produce her montages, thus employing structural mirroring much as she had done on the book’s cover.

Lest we have any doubts that the text from *Disavowals* analyzed above is meant to be connected to Narcissus’ search for the absolute, we should note that immediately following that dream narrative in which female body parts are so violently removed, Cahun directly addresses the Narcissus myth and engages
with the ideas we have just seen in Gide and Gourmont. In a passage titled (in English) “Self-Love,” Cahun more directly critiques the myth of Narcissus, now incorporating explicit reference to Narcissus’ counterpart, Echo. Cahun writes:

Self-Love [in English in the original]

The death of Narcissus has always seemed the most incomprehensible to me. Only one explanation suggests itself: Narcissus didn’t love himself. He let himself fall for an image. He didn’t know how to get beyond appearances. If he had loved the face of a nymph instead of his own, his mortal weakness would have been the same.
2.6 Claude Cahun, Untitled (Cahun naked floating in rock pool), 1928.
But if [Narcissus] had known how to love himself beyond his mirage, his happy escape would have been worthy of the envy of the centuries, the symbol of vital paradise, the myth of the privileged man.

That beautiful child was able to extract the infinite from his reflections, whereas we remain vibrations away, always the same, incapable of going any further.  

Here, Cahun draws a parallel between two duping mirrors. The self-images sent back by the mirror and the Other are equally deceptive. In claiming that if Narcissus had loved “the face of the nymph instead of his own, his mortal weakness would have been the same,” Cahun follows Gourmont in imagining Echo to be yet another duping mirror who entraps Narcissus in reflections—
in “appearances” that Narcissus cannot “get beyond.” Drawing a parallel between Cahun’s dream narrative and her discussion of Narcissus, we might see the phrase “beyond his mirage” as a description of the self free of bodily contingencies—something quite parallel to the androgyne toward which Narcissus/Adam regresses in Gide’s “Treatise on Narcissus,” or the beating heart of Cahun’s dream. Significantly, however, Cahun contrasts her own situation with Narcissus’: she cannot, or perhaps does not wish to, “extract the infinite” from her reflections. She says: “We remain vibrations away … incapable of going any further.”

It becomes clear that Cahun is attempting to formulate an alternative to the Symbolist pursuit of the absolute through Narcissus. The next section of text is clearly meant to refer back to the passage we have just been examining. It also begins with the words “Self-love.” In this portion of text, which I quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, however, Cahun points the reader away from this search for the absolute toward other possibilities:

Self-love. [in English in the original]

A hand clenched on a mirror—a mouth, palpitating nostrils—between the swooning eyelids, the crazy fixity of enlarged pupils … in the brutal view of an electric light in blond, lilac, and green, under the stars, here is everything that I would like to illuminate of the mystery: the neo-narcissism of a practical humanity.

My picture would be of this sensual and hypocritical period when people prefer their own contact and their mute disdain to the chatty love of others.

Do we believe this to be impossible? One contrasts to this picture morals and other loves. Meanwhile, the mirrors’ reflecting surface thickens. No longer absolute, but comfortably relative, being individualizes itself. Pride becomes a virtue. The body knows itself and absolves itself.24

This is, of course, the passage with which I opened this discussion of Cahun’s Narcissus, the text that proposes the possibility of “the neo-narcissism of a practical humanity.”

Ultimately, by the end of this book, I want my reader to see that Cahun’s “neo-narcissism” is linked to the rejection of the absolute, the embrace of the contingent, and necessarily includes the acceptance of a body subject to imperfection, to frailty and to the ravages of time and a subjectivity that does not fit with the conventional heterosexual paradigm. In Disavowals, this argument emerges slowly and circuitously. Chapter II introduces the struggle for the absolute in the self and the possibility of “neo-narcissism” as an alternative. The reader must follow Cahun and this book further to fully understand what is at stake in this reconfiguration of narcissism into “neo-narcissism.” Ultimately, we shall see that Cahun’s interpretation of Narcissus differs from that of the Symbolist poets who had so influenced her. For Cahun and her partner Moore, the mirroring of the self by the other is a positive means toward a collaborative creative process rather than a sign of weakness that must be overcome.
Self-love

Chapter II proposes incompatible ideas about Narcissus—one inherited by Cahun from her literary predecessors, another imagined by (perhaps lived by?) Cahun and Moore and elaborated in *Disavowals*. In the Symbolist account, Narcissus’ goal is the search for the absolute in the self or “primordial absolutism”—a search that both Cahun and the Symbolists agree is doomed to failure. The second is what Cahun calls neo-narcissism. Before going on to grapple further with Cahun’s conception of neo-narcissism, I want to define some context for this issue of Narcissus as an emblem of human subjectivity and as a figure for the artist/poet.

Cahun would likely have been aware of the fact that when it was proposed in the late nineteenth century, by Gide and others, this Symbolist model of art was not widely accepted by cultural conservatives.25 The term “egoism” directly borrowed from the Symbolist context shows up in Cahun’s early writings and becomes a central motif in *Disavowals*. But Cahun’s willingness to make her own self-exploration the center of her book is a proposal of an alternative to both traditional and Symbolist views of self and art. Cahun offers an audacious intervention into her own cultural context.

However, Cahun goes further than saying to her readers something along the lines of “I who am not a man, but a woman and a lesbian, have an equally legitimate self, a self worthy of exploration.” In *Disavowals*, she flaunts this self-exploration in the most overt manner. Central to the photomontage that opens chapter II of *Disavowals* is a drawn, clearly female hand clasping a hand-mirror. This figure immediately calls to mind stereotypes of narcissistic femininity. However, the face reflected in the mirror refuses to adhere to those norms. In the mirror an image of Cahun, head covered, nose and mouth veiled, is visible. The emphasis is on the eyes, which look directly out at the viewer in a manner that is mysterious, perhaps even angry, and markedly unsexy by conventional standards. In the top-right corner of the photomontage, a paper hand cut out from the galleys of *Disavowals* points to the center of the mirror (Figure’s 2.8, 2.9).

The words inscribed on the hand, which are taken from the middle of chapter II, consist of a formula that demonstrates an extreme version of the search for the absolute in the self. The entire passage reads:

Boxing with shadows.

I am (the “I” is) a result of God multiplied by God divided by God:

\[
\text{God} \times \text{God} \div \text{God}
\]

(Such are the ways of treating the absolute! One sees that ...)26

This formula evokes the Symbolist ideal of the Narcissistic self—autonomous, all-knowing, all-powerful creator, the “I” as a kind of God subject only to itself. Appearing literally at the center of the chapter, this formula is—indeed, God is—a witty reiteration of the notion of “primordial absolutism” in the texts we have been analyzing. The formula is preceded by the warning that such a search for the absolute in the self is as futile as “boxing with shadows.” Afterwards,
a wittily ironic parenthesis reads: “Such are the ways of treating the absolute!” A reader who has carefully studied the photomontage that opens chapter II will recognize this formula in the middle of the chapter, and likewise, one who has read the chapter and then looked back to the photomontage will connect the two. The cut-out hand bearing the formula points directly at Cahun’s face in the center of the mirror. Her face is made recognizable by the fact that this very image appears in several montages throughout the book (It has already been repeated several times in the photomontage that opens chapter I, for example.) Initially, when focusing on the hand-mirror with the hand pointing at it, one imagines the “I” referred to in the formula, the “I” who imagines her own primordial absolutism, to be Cahun, whose veiled face and piercing eyes are reflected at its center. Of course, we say to ourselves, “there is Cahun, it is her hand that holds the mirror, and she scrutinizes herself.” And the hand that points to her bearing that formula labels her as the subject of the montage. It seems significant that this hand-mirror at the center is flanked at both top corners of the photomontage by images of shoulders, as if the mirror at the center is a giant heart that displaces the limbs that surround it. While far from a literal depiction of it, the focus of the reflection at the center and the dispersal of the body to the edges of the photomontage resonates with Cahun’s dream text.

Yet it is difficult to keep one’s attention focused on this interpretation. Look a little longer at the whole photomontage; focus your attention on the large eye at the bottom; notice the curve of the black field above the eye, the way it echoes the swath of dark fabric, on the head of Cahun in the hand-mirror. Now imagine that the large eye at the bottom of the montage appears to be part of a much larger head similarly swathed in black, a face much larger than the frame, which is rising up from below the frame. Imagine that everything in the black field above the eye—the hand holding the mirror, Cahun’s reflection, the body parts at the edges—are nothing more than decorations on the fabric, or pictures in the mind of a huge looming figure of which we see only a fragment of an eye and a covered forehead. Who, we ask ourselves, is this figure with the giant eye? One clue to this question is the reflection in the large eye itself. There is Cahun, again, now inverted, which is to say pictured in the eye of another person, or alternatively, in a camera’s lens. Cahun, it is implied, is somewhere outside the montage being looked at by that giant eye. What, then, are we to make of that leg that reaches over the bridge of the looming figure’s nose? Noticing this breaks the spell cast by the looming figure.

What we are left with is an oscillation between multiple readings. Each of these implies a scrutinizing subject, but the position of that subject (within or outside the montage) is never resolved. And the identity of that subject cannot
be fixed, although we can be sure that Cahun is involved in some way with the figure. This play between subject and object, this unresolvable shuttling between self and other, is the substance of the photomontage. The montage brings the viewer into a process of questioning—into a recognition of shifting visions of a self. It brings together the popular image of femininity as narcissistic (the hand-mirror) with a serious and difficult exploration of self, an exploration that claims the right to imagine the self as seriously as any Symbolist poet ever did (“I am God (×) God/God).

We see this kind of compelling and confusing attempt to grapple with Narcissus elsewhere in Disavowals. For example, in a “proverb” from the book’s final chapter, God and the story of Narcissus and Echo are again linked:

The nymph Echo wanting to please Narcissus ... sent his words back to him ... in reverse.

The echo, that which comes from God, returns my thought (subject, object interchangeable, verb intact—the verb [le verbe] being the Word [le Verbe]).

The echo, the one that comes from my thought, returns God, like the mirror does to my body (right and left interchangeable—and the middle looks similar, I’m told).27

The text is a characteristically dense and difficult piece of writing that requires some unraveling. The nymph Echo (capital E for the proper name) mirrors Narcissus—“sends his words back to him.” In this, Cahun is staying close to the myth. But immediately things become more complicated. For they are sent back to him “in reverse”—which means that Echo’s words distort meaning in the same way as a mirror would. The passage goes on: “the echo (now in lowercase—thus a sound repeating Narcissus’ voice), that which comes from God, returns my thought.” Notice that the echo “comes from God.” But if it is an echo and the source of it is “my thought,” then the “me” implied by the passage must be God. The subject and object (as in a grammatical analysis) are, says Cahun, interchangeable. The actor and the acted upon can switch roles. Only the action (the verb) remains intact. And, in a pun that makes sense only in French, the stable “verb” is actually “the Word” of God.

In the place of the traditional myth in which Narcissus is male and Echo, who reflects him, is his female supplement, Cahun proposes a process of reciprocal reflection in which the differences between subject and object are broken down. In this passage, clear distinctions between me, Echo, God and Narcissus become difficult to uphold. The structure of this proverb thus parallels the structure of the photomontage. It proposes the absolute self—God, the searcher after the absolute self—Narcissus, and the female supplement with no voice of her own (Echo). But it unravels the conventional distinctions between them in favor of a reciprocal relationship in which each can take the role of the other: each is structurally dependent on the other. Thus Echo—the one who mirrors—is elevated from her role as passive mirror to active participant. To the extent that Narcissus and Echo are understood as paradigmatic figures of man and woman, this shift in their roles is connected to an attempt to destabilize traditional assumptions about gender.

As the text continues, Cahun makes yet another leap away from her initial description of narcissistic contemplation. Rather than searching for the absolute
by divesting herself of breasts and ovaries, as she had done in her dream in chapter II, she draws a parallel between the body and God. The body, which had to be eliminated in order to pursue the absolute in chapter II, has, by the last chapter of *Disavowals*, become something that can be seen as reciprocal to the absolute: “The echo, the one that comes from my thought, returns God, like the mirror does to my body (right and left interchangeable—and the middle looks similar, I’m told).” And the body, with its bilateral symmetry, can also be reversed: its two sides are likened to the sentence in which subject and object are interchangeable.

Rather than addressing a God as a religious figurehead, Cahun uses the term “God” as an emblem for the general conception of what she calls “the absolute.” She interprets Symbolist essays on Narcissus as stories of the struggle to propose a kind of absolute subjectivity, and she is interested in the fact that the Symbolist Narcissus always fails in this pursuit. For the Symbolists, the struggle is an end in itself because it enables the production of the work of art. This failed pursuit is vital to Cahun because it questions the notion that subjectivity can ever be autonomous and thus undermines mythologies of the male artistic genius, mythologies that had been the staple of ideas about art in the West from the Renaissance onward. Thus these late nineteenth-century texts presaged the general questioning of art that took hold during the First World War and would be central to much avant-garde production between the wars. However, Cahun not only rejects the notion of autonomous subjectivity; she also questions the terms of the struggle described by the Symbolists. She transforms their ideas about Narcissus in order to formulate new models of self-contemplation and subjectivity that undermine the absolute altogether: “No longer absolute, but comfortably relative, being individualizes itself. Pride becomes a virtue. The body knows itself and absolves itself.” Relative and individualized, embodied and unashamed, this vision of neo-narcissism leaves space open for women, egoists and others who fail to conform to traditional ideas about subjectivity and artistic genius.

**Neo-narcissism, Photography and Photomontage**

There is another way to describe the process of active mirroring that we now imagine both Narcissus and Echo to engage in. For what is photography if it is not the mirroring of the exterior world with intention? We might imagine the large eye at the bottom of the photomontage that introduces chapter II as a figure for the camera’s lens, which, like an eye, captures images in reverse and upside down. If photography is an active mirror, the manipulations of photomontage extend the intentionality of mirroring even further. The text of *Disavowals* meditates explicitly on the issue of mirroring in terms that poetically evoke both photography and photomontage but also parallel the discussion of Narcissus and Echo.

In a section titled “Guillotine window” that appears early in chapter II, Cahun describes the mirror and the photograph in terms that are reminiscent of the parable of Narcissus, Echo and God.
Guillotine Window

A sheet of glass. Where shall I put the silver? On this side, on that; before or behind the pane?

Before. I imprison myself. I blind myself. What does it matter to me, Passerby, to offer you a mirror in which you recognize yourself, though it be a deforming mirror and signed by my own hand? ...

Behind. I am equally enclosed. I will know nothing of what is outside. At least I will recognize my face—and perhaps that will be enough to please me.29

A “guillotine window” is a window in which the panes slide open and shut vertically. The window evokes reciprocal vision. Imagine two subjects, each on one side of the pane, each the potential object of the other’s gaze. In the passage, Cahun meditates on what it would mean to turn the window into a mirror: “A sheet of glass. Where shall I put the silver? On this side, on that; before or behind the pane? Before. I imprison myself. I blind myself.”30 If Cahun puts the reflective metal on the back of the pane of glass, transforming the window into a mirror in which Other can now see herself, Cahun will be behind the mirror, looking at a mute surface, unable to see through the window to the other side. If we take this description literally, she is imprisoned and blinded by her position as she offers a mirror to the person on the other side of the pane. Cahun considers the alternative: “Behind. I am equally enclosed. I will know nothing of what is outside. At least I will recognize my face—and perhaps that will be enough to please me.”31 Now, with the mirror facing her, Cahun can see her reflection, but she remains isolated, cannot see through, and is equally trapped, now in her own self-contemplation.

This passage is meant to be evocative, not literal. And I would argue that it addresses the dilemma of love. Cahun poetically implies that being a mirror for the Other prevents one from seeing oneself, like Echo who becomes nothing but a cipher repeating the words of Narcissus. The price of rejecting the role of Echo is the self-enclosed isolation of Narcissus. Significantly, it is Cahun who controls where the silver will be placed. This passage thus poetically evokes the dilemma that arises when a relationship is not reciprocal and one chooses to mirror the Other at the cost of losing the self. This is, of course, the dilemma of Echo and sadly close to paradigms of heterosexual romantic love in which the woman is handmaiden to her husband. Ultimately, Cahun rejects both of the options she initially considers.

Thinking about the title, “Fênetre à guillotine,” we now see that the metal that transforms the window into a mirror is like a guillotine. The French is multivalent, suggesting both the sliding “guillotine window” and also the transformation of the window into a guillotine by the application of metal that cuts the subject off from the world. The guillotine is, of course, a violent means of execution used from the time of the French Revolution. In this case it describes a symbolic cut between the subject and the world. Cahun’s title also recalls the image described by André Breton in the “Manifesto of Surrealism,” in which, in a dream, he sees a “man cut in two by a window” and uses that violent visual image as the beginning of his Surrealist creative process.32
However, the guillotine—a blade that drops—can also be construed, in relation to photography, as the shutter that cuts off light. Indeed, “guillotine” was the name given to one of the earliest shutter mechanisms in which a rectangle dropped down in front of the aperture. So the description above also evokes photography. Cahun’s question seems to be who is before or behind the lens: who is the photographer and who the subject? “Where shall I put the silver? On this side, on that; before or behind the pane?” Cahun writes, “What does it matter to me, Passerby, to offer you a mirror in which you recognize yourself, though it be a deforming mirror and signed by my own hand?” This mirror is, says Cahun, “signed by my own hand,” a description that evokes the notion of art (and in Cahun’s case photography). Thus the photograph is also envisioned as a tool and a trap with the same potentially unequal relation between subject and object that we see in the paradigms evoked by the myth of Narcissus.

In the following paragraphs, Cahun attempts to imagine an alternative to this dilemma, an alternative in which there is interchange across the boundaries of self and other—something more like the window of her title than a mirror or a guillotine:

To leave the glass clear, and according to chance and the hour to see confusedly, partially, sometimes fleeting visions, sometimes my gaze. Perfect reciprocity ... Troubled vision, shattered line of sight ... You do not want to stop yourself, to understand. And me, am I able to?

This passage is interesting to contemplate as a metaphor for knowledge and an evocation of love relations. The description of the clear glass abandons the notion of absolute knowledge through the world or the Other. Instead, Cahun settles for partial visions, “confusing” and “fleeting” though they may be. The glass, which is both transparent and reflective, offers an imperfect reciprocal relation for those who look from either side. The view is partial, subject to fleeting time and movement, and the world beyond the glass is sometimes lost when, “according to chance and the hour,” the one who gazes sees her own reflection. This is the frustrating metaphor for reciprocal love. Out of this frustration comes a resignation to the partiality of knowledge of both self and other.

Cahun’s response to this dilemma is to return intentionality to the situation, to take some control of the images she sees and produces. And her description evokes not only photography, but photomontage:

All right, then: break the glass ...

With the pieces, put together a stained-glass window. A Byzantine work. Transparency, opacity. Such an avowal of artifice! ... I told you: look at the sign—guillotine window ...

If the window and mirror are emblems of photography, the breaking of the glass becomes a metaphor for the cutting required in photomontage. And the montage is pieced together like a Byzantine mosaic or a stained-glass window. Portions will read clearly, “transparently,” whereas others will be so detached from their contexts as to be opaque. This description of rearranging pieces into a new whole is also a metaphor for Disavowals in its entirety, for the texts are also a montage. And at the heart of work is an “avowal of artifice” (the word “aveu”
of the title *Aveux non avenus*). Thus, in this metaphor of the shattered glass, we have an emblem of Cahun’s refusal to allow the text or images to be fully transparent, or to claim to offer up any truth—a dis-avowal.

However, we also have a way into understanding Cahun’s reconfiguration of narcissism into neo-narcissism. For, in the passages above, Cahun is not just describing the human dilemma to herself; she speaks to another who is caught in this dilemma with her: “Troubled vision, shattered line of sight … You do not want to stop yourself, to understand. And me, am I able to?” She is not breaking the glass and rearranging it herself; she is suggesting this strategy to another. The attempt at perfect reciprocity, in which self and other see clearly, in which love is imagined as absolute knowledge, she suggests, will always end in disenchantment, but out of this failure to achieve the impossible, an alternative can be constructed. We now have a taste of the “neo-narcissism” that Cahun imagines, an interaction that is no longer absolute and self-enclosed, but rather dialogic or “chatty.”

We have come full circle now, to the passage with which we began this chapter. It is rich with implications about Cahun’s attitudes toward love, femininity and photography. It is thus worth quoting once again in a fuller form:

Self-love.

A hand clenched on a mirror—a mouth, palpitating nostrils—between the swooning eyelids, the crazy fixity of enlarged pupils … in the brutal view of an electric light in blond, lilac, and green, under the stars, here is everything that I would like to illuminate of the mystery: the neo-narcissism of a practical humanity.

My picture will be of this sensual and hypocritical period when people prefer their own contact and their mute disdain to the chatty love of others.

Do we believe this to be impossible? One contrasts to this picture morals and other loves. Meanwhile, the mirrors’ reflecting surface thickens. No longer absolute, but comfortably relative, being individualizes itself. Pride becomes a virtue. The body knows itself and absolves itself.

The myth of Narcissus is everywhere. It haunts us. It has inspired the perfecting of life since that fatal day when the image was captured on the wave without ripples. For the invention of polished metal is clearly derived from a narcissistic etymology.

Bronze—silver—glass: our mirrors are almost perfect … But even a small irritation tears them from their relaxed state, with the sound of broken glass, the reflection shatters.

It will be necessary now to fix the image in time as we fix it in space, seize the movements as they are made—surprise them from behind.

“Mirror,” “fix”—these words have no place here.

In sum, what bothers Narcissus the seer most is the insufficiency, the discontinuity of his own gaze.

In this passage, Cahun describes a culture of narcissism, where people “prefer their own contact.” As an alternative, she proposes what she calls “the neo-narcissism of a practical humanity.” The myth of Narcissus “haunts us” because
it has “inspired the perfecting of life” according to the exterior image in the mirror, be it in water, polished metal, the photograph or social convention. Cahun proposes an alternative in “neo-narcissism” where the perfection of the self according to external images is no longer the aim: “No longer absolute, but comfortably relative, being individualizes itself. Pride becomes a virtue. The body knows itself and absolves itself.” Contrast this acceptance of relativity, individuality and embodiedness with Cahun’s dream of having “my head shaved, my teeth pulled, and my breasts cut off—everything that bothers my gaze or slows it down—my stomach, my ovaries, the conscious and encysted brain,” and you have a demonstration of how Cahun imagines neo-narcissism as an alternative to the dilemma of Narcissus. As Cahun notes in the passage above, “what bothers Narcissus the seer most, is the insufficiency, the discontinuity of his own gaze ... He sees enough of his ideal to be disgusted with the rest of the world—little, too little. Not enough to content him.” In neo-narcissism, Cahun proposes, one should accept this insufficiency, shatter Narcissus’ glass, rearrange the pieces as you will, and turn discontinuity into a means of art.

What is more, the beginning of this passage, with its reference to “morals and other loves,” extends what might have been a literary or psychological discussion of narcissism into the realm of social convention, romance and sexuality. For if these loves and morals that are “other” to convention are accepted, if “being individualizes itself,” “Pride becomes a virtue,” and “the body knows itself and absolves itself,” then surely this opens a space in which women and homosexuals are no longer haunted by the myth of Narcissus. I like to imagine that in Cahun’s picture of the “neo-narcissism of a practical humanity” she envisions a world in which women can be proud without being seen as evil, in which they are no longer held to traditional standards of beauty and comportment but can accept themselves as they are, a world in which their bodies are no longer a source of shame. Cahun’s picture leaves open the possibility that women can, with pride, strive for the kind of self-knowledge that for centuries has been reserved for men. It also imagines a world in which women’s worth is no longer dependent on conforming to conventional standards of beauty.

I and You: Narcissism of Two

The kinds of exploration of subjectivity central to chapter II of Disavowals are introduced in the frontispiece (see Figure 0.12) and short prefatory text that open the book. The frontispiece has many connections to the photomontage in chapter II. For one thing, it overtly thematizes self-reflection. Indeed, the frontispiece is intended to introduce the questioning of subjectivity and proposal of intersubjectivity from the very beginning of Disavowals. The frontispiece shares specific imagery with the photomontage that introduces chapter II. The hand-mirror and the eye are central elements. Here, bodily imagery seems to imply questions of self. Initially we are struck by the imagery of mirrors, eyes (the windows to the soul?), lips (which allow the words to express the self), and the idea of the self striving toward “the absolute” represented by the French word “God” (Dieu) in the top register. At the bottom left, a round mirror frames
images of Cahun's distorted head. The knuckles of the hands below this circle line up to form the impression that there is a person, whose body is invisible, holding a hand-mirror toward the space of the viewer. However, the mirror is facing away from the person who holds it, and the faces and torsos in the mirror are multiple and distorted by the reflection and divested of identifying features. There is nothing straightforward about this evocation of self-contemplation. The distorted hand-mirror is roughly aligned with the circle of a globe at the right around which hands and arms are symmetrically arranged. The image of the world thus echoes the “self”-reflection opposite it. The sense that we are meant to compare these two circles is enhanced by the fact that each of them is surmounted by a strange white-edged form that points upward to the word “God” at the top of the montage. The self (however multiple and distorted), like a world, is connected to the absolute being—strives, that is to say, for the kind of primordial absolutism the Symbolists sought. The mirroring of self, world and God introduces a search for the absolute (God) via the self that is thematized throughout the complex interrelationship between image and text. Such a struggle was not typically the purview of women, in that women in the early twentieth century were not imagined to have the kind of complex, self-actualizing subjectivities attributed to gifted men, and to male artists and poets in particular. Cahun nonetheless pursued the kind of self-interrogation that had been the prerogative of male artists. And while in some parts of Disavowals she rejects the attribution of femininity altogether, part of the project of Disavowals is to claim this kind of subjective agency for women. As the previous chapter showed us, she was deeply engaged with the social inculcation of gender.

The reader's sense that a striving for self-knowledge is a central theme is enhanced by the short text that follows the frontispiece and introduces the book as a whole. Indeed, this text, like chapter II of the book, plays with the possible ways in which such knowledge might be gained:

The invisible adventure.

The lens [l'objectif] follows the eye, the mouth, the wrinkles flowering on the skin ... The face's expression is violent, sometimes tragic. Finally, calm, the carefully elaborated calm of acrobats. A professional smile—et voilà!

They reappear—the mirror in the hand, the rouge and powder on the eyes. One beat. Period. New paragraph.

I begin again.

But what a ridiculous merry-go-round this must seem to those who haven’t seen the huge obstacles and abysses I’ve leapt over—and I have shown them nothing.37

The text initially identifies an “invisible adventure,” then immediately goes on to evoke the visible through the theme of the photographic portrait. The photographic portrait, however, is anything but an “objective” image of its subject. Playing upon the French word for lens, “l'objectif,” a word that carries the same implications of both purposefulness and factuality in French that it does in English, Cahun describes the poses that are captured. We are given images
of theatricality, concentrated calm or professional cheerfulness, repeated ad infinitum in a “ridiculous merry-go-round.” The typical photographic portrait will tell us nothing about the truth of the sitter; the “truth” is to be found, it seems, in an “invisible adventure.”

Rather than “encumber [herself] with the equipment of facts,” Cahun’s narrator proposes to follow the ethereal and the transitory: “No. I will follow the wake of planes in the air, the path on the water, the mirage in the pupils.” These descriptive phrases resonate with the graphic white lines that point toward the top center of the photomontage. Following these ethereal paths will constitute the invisible adventure. The rest of the preliminary text is meant to prepare the reader for this adventure and for the struggle that it will involve:

No point putting myself at ease. The abstract, the dream, are as limited for me as the concrete, as the real. What am I to do? In a narrow mirror show the part for the whole? Mix up a halo and splatters? Refusing to bump into walls, bump into windows? In the black night.

While waiting to see clearly, I want to hunt myself down, war with myself. Who, sensing herself armed against herself, even if it be with vain words, would not try her hardest even if it puts her in the center of the void?

It’s false. It is little. But it trains the eye.

I would only want to sew, prick, kill with the extreme tip. The rest of the body, all that follows, what a waste of time. Only travel with my prow [à la proue de moi-même].

The entire description evokes an unmooring of self, a journey that requires giving up the apparatus of preconceptions. Pushing to the limits of self, like a ship sailing dark, unknown waters or flying to the stars, Cahun imagines her journey at the prow, the tip, where she will be the first to encounter the unknown. Her question, “What am I to do?” at first appears rhetorical. We might think that we are to reject the idea of showing “the part for the whole” or bumping “into windows in the black of night.” However, we shall see that Disavowals will ultimately embrace those partial glimpses. Indeed, the journey that the narrator and the readers travel together in the course of the book will, in the end, be the main point of the endeavor.

The last line of the prefatory text, “Only travel at my prow (Ne voyager qu’à proue de moi-même) is called to mind when the reader encounters the first words of chapter II, with its title “Moi-Même” and its subtitle, which is also a claim: “The siren succumbs to her own voice.” As we have seen, the siren is drawn, by her own voice, into a journey of self-discovery.

This journey is emblazoned in the frontispiece as well. Indeed, the photomontage, the frontispiece of Disavowals, like the prefatory text, gives us glimpses of some of the book’s prominent themes. The journey will be a product of mirroring and self-reflection. Divided through a central axis, the photomontage makes gestures at bilateral symmetry. Thus, like the cover of Disavowals, the montage as a whole proposes to be a reflection of itself. In the word “God” the mirror also works inconsistently, leaving the “D” intact, reversing the “E” and remaining equivocal about the symmetrical letters “I” and the “U.” The word “Dieu” rises up through a two-headed dove that is divided down the
central axis. This evocation of God is not a product of piety, but instead a sign of self-exploration, like the formula: “I am (the “I” is) a result of God multiplied by God divided by God.” Later in *Disavowals*, Cahun will quip ironically: “You have the god that you deserve. So much the worse for you.” Cahun’s pursuit of the absolute, via the self, then, is at once serious, skeptical and often funny. Throughout *Disavowals* the text and images alternate between earnestness and irony.

Turning back to the frontispiece after reading these portions of text, the imagery seems even more complex. The dove at the top evokes associations with the Holy Ghost of the Trinity. However, the bilateral symmetry of the dove, which is now two-headed as if reflected in a vertical mirror, transforms the associations from tripartite (suggested in also in the triangle behind the dove) to doubled. The double head of the bird substitutes two spirits for the evocation of the Trinity. Significantly, the word “Dieu” that defines the center of the doubled dove contains within it “I” and “U”—homonyms for the words “I” and “You.” This doubled image is reiterated in the center of the montage. So now we are presented not with a unity, but with two souls—I and You. I see this as an emblem of neo-narcissism.

At the center, an eye is cupped by a small pair of hands whose forms resemble an upside-down version of the wings of the doubled bird above. These are held, in turn, by another pair of hands attached to arms that rest upon a large pair of lips. The lips perch atop a series of globes, whose slightly off-kilter intersection makes the bottom three orbs loosely resemble an eye. The globes thus connect to the smaller eye in the hands. Throughout this montage we see elements mirroring one another. The “I/eye” in the image refers to the notion of the self. Not only is the eye commonly seen as the window to the soul, but it seems meant to evoke the English homonym “I.” So the double set of hands holds up the self (the eye/I), almost in a gesture of offering—the self not retreating into an invisible center but opening in a doubled gesture.

Yet the position of the hands seems significant in other ways as well. Appearing as they do below the evocations of God, the hands seem to replace the traditional gesture of prayer (flat hands held together) with open hands cupping an I/eye. They also call to mind the offering of the host at communion or the raising of the cup of wine. The eye that sees and the lips that speak are sheltered here, by two pairs of hands that echo the two-headed dove. The singular is thus replaced by the plural, the closed by the open, and each self is a holy offering. Furthermore, as the text suggests, God is replaced by this imagery of the dual self that is connected to Cahun’s notion of neo-narcissism. To further enhance this interpretation, as Honor Lasalle and Abigail Solomon-Godeau have pointed out, the overall shape of the central lips, hands and eye of the montage loosely evoke the female genitals. The eye on top suggests the clitoris, the hands and arms the labia, and the mouth acts vaguely as an anus. Is female sexuality proposed here as a source for the autonomous self rather than an obstacle to it?

The elements of the montage also connect to another set of images: a drawing produced by Cahun and Moore to emblematize themselves as an entity. This “duogram” (as opposed to a “monogram”) has been brilliantly discussed by Tirza Latimer (Figure 2.10). Here the initials L. S. (Lucy Schwob) and S. M. (Suzanne Malherbe) have been collapsed into “L. S. M.,” which,
2.10 Claude Cahun, Untitled (“duogram”), ca. 1919.
when uttered aloud, sound like “Elles s’aiment”—“They love each other”—as Latimer has pointed out. In this emblem for the couple, eye, lips and hands are stacked upon one another in much the same way they have been arranged in the photomontage. In the duogram the eye is labeled Suzanne Malherbe (alias Moore) and the lips Lucy Schwob (alias Cahun). On one hand, this suggests the pursuits of each at this time—Malherbe/Moore in the graphic visual arts, Cahun/Schwob in literature. The positions of the central elements have been reversed in the montage, with the eye above and lips below. Seen in the light of the duogram, the significance of the “I” and “U” in the frontispiece, which read in English “I” and “U,” appear, like the two-headed dove, as an intentional reference to the couple. The photomontage seems to propose not a singular Symbolist-like self in place of God, but a doubled, collaborative interspersal of selves. Now the frontispiece seems less an image of an individual’s search for subjectivity than a proposal of a new unusual (singular) form of subjectivity that is not one, but plural, where two narcissisms engage in the “fusion of desires” and where the body with its limits and contingencies is evoked as something to be honored rather than disdained.

If we are to discuss mirroring in relation to Cahun, we must look at what is perhaps the most famous image of Cahun, the portrait in which, head shaved and wearing a shirt checked with a harlequinesque pattern, she gazes askance in a mirror (Figure 2.11). This image was first exhibited in 1930, when *Disavowals* was launched. Significantly, Cahun chose this photo out of the large body of photographs to enlarge, display and, in a sense, represent the book. This image of Cahun both invokes and refutes traditional associations with self-reflection. On the one hand, it calls to mind traditional imagery of women at their toilette, which had long been common in painting as well as fashion imagery. However, the photograph of Cahun at the mirror featured at the launch of *Disavowals* is by no means a straightforward image of narcissistic self-regard. In fact what is most striking about this photograph is its disjunctiveness, the contrast between the self reflected in the mirror, captured at second hand by the camera—physically exposed, unaware, seemingly lost in contemplation—and the self captured directly by the camera—self-possessed, meeting the camera’s gaze head on. The image reverses the traditional imagery of the toilette, which, as in Rubens’ *Venus at a Mirror* (1615), shows a woman gazing at herself in the mirror and her reflected image seductively enticing the viewer. Instead of exuding female charm, Cahun is androgynous. Her hair is cropped too short to be a fashionable 1920s bob; her eyebrows are indiscernible; her clothing looks more like part of a harlequin costume than either male or female dress. Where, in the reflected image, her shirt is open to reveal her neck, we see not a soft and supple feminine swath of skin, but taught tendons. The eyes in the reflected image turn away defiantly both from the viewer and from herself in a rejection of self-absorbed narcissistic self-regard. And her direct look at us is defiant—more like Manet’s *Olympia* than the *Rokeby Venus*. Significantly, this photograph has a pendant that, we can surmise, was taken in the same photo session—an image of Moore at the mirror (Figure 2.12). The image adheres much more closely to the traditional imagery of the woman before the mirror: Moore’s gaze into the mirror allows for the notion of her self-regard while also providing an image of her seductive look...
out at the viewer. However, unlike traditional images of the woman at the mirror, the usual signifiers of bodily seduction are lacking. Her clothing covers all of her hair as well as her flesh.

If we look at the images together, they appear to be in dialogue with each other. Once we have seen Cahun’s photograph in front of the same mirror, we can only imagine that Moore is looking out at Cahun. Now, what had at first seemed like Cahun’s defiant gaze out at the viewer, seen in the context of Moore’s photograph, reads as a determined seduction. What is more, the photographs lead one to imagine a photographic session in which each of the women played the role of photographer. Given that they lived together and were both artists, it seems probable that this kind of working together was not an isolated instance.
There are places in the text of *Disavowals* that support this notion. A text we addressed at the end of chapter 1 reads:

> Sweet, nevertheless, ... the moment when our two heads lean over a photograph (ah! that our hair would meld as if never to untangle). Portrait of one or the other, our two narcissisms drowning there, it was the impossible realized in a magic mirror. The exchange, the superimposition, the fusion of desires. The unity of the image obtained by the close friendship of two bodies—even if it sends their souls to the devil!

Post-scriptum: At present I exist otherwise.\(^4^3\)

Anachronistic though it may be, since the text is purported to have been written in 1920, I like to imagine that this passage describes a process similar to the one Cahun and Moore engaged in when making the photographs and
photomontages that punctuate Disavowals. In this excerpt from a letter written by Cahun to her lover Moore, these concerns with self and narcissism are explicitly linked to looking at photography. However, rather than acting as a simple mirror enabling narcissism, the photograph is the site of narcissism’s “drowning”—of its gradual diminishment. Here the photograph is a “magic mirror.” It does not straightforwardly reflect the self like a mirror. Instead, it suggests a different kind of portrait, an image in which self is dissolved and “the exchange, the superimposition, the fusion of desires” can be imagined. And I wonder whether it describes both the subject and the author of the photograph looking together, each seeing in it their own image (whether as subject or artist) but also the image of the other. The one who took the photograph sees her own artistic self-expression and also the self-composition of the sitter, and vice versa. And further, in the case of Cahun and Moore, might that look into the photograph together have been the precursor to the making of a photomontage in a collaboration where different elements were manipulated and contributed? I wonder, that is, whether the “neo-narcissism” Cahun sought might not have been closest to being found when the “two narcissicisms” were replaced by an “exchange” representing the “fusion of desires,” whose final product could be both reciprocal love and a work of art. That the love described might “send their souls to the devil” suggests that the relationship is breaking taboos. Love and art seem to be intermingled here.

Even if, as Leperlier and others maintain, Cahun had the initial ideas for the photographs of her, set them up, and mapped in detail the designs for the photomontages, I find it hard to imagine that Moore did not help her take the photographs or that Cahun and Moore would not have brainstormed over the ideas together before photographic sessions had begun. Should we then describe the images that are normally designated as “self-portraits” of Cahun as portraits by Moore? Or by Moore and Cahun together? What about the photomontages? What does it mean that the frontispiece to Disavowals is signed by Moore and that all the other montages are unsigned? How should we interpret the advertisement on the title page of the book that it is “illustrated with photolithographs composed by Moore after the designs [projets] of the author”? “Composed” seems too active a verb to suggest that Moore was merely some kind of assistant without any intentional contribution to the compositions, as some have claimed. I will leave it to others to make these determinations. What I do want to address—what I think is central to understand—is that the notion of reciprocality and collaborativity in love relations and in art were important to Cahun and that they are connected to her conception of neo-narcissism. Cahun sees an exploration of and rethinking of narcissism as a positive tool in both love relations and art, a tool that might allow Cahun and Moore to imagine what it would be to “exist otherwise.”

Notes

Reading Claude Cahun’s Disavowals

2 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 27, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 207; Cahun, Disavowals, 24.


5 Quoted in ibid., 89.

6 Quoted in ibid.


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 22.

13 Ibid., 24.

14 My thanks to the anonymous reader of this manuscript, who directed me to the cross and clock imagery on the covers of the text.


17 Ibid., 200.

18 Ibid., 198.

19 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 9, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 187; Cahun, Disavowals, 30.

20 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 35–6, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 215; Cahun, Disavowals, 30.


22 For an excellent discussion of Lautréamont’s text in relation to Surrealist photography, see Amy Lyford, Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

23 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 36, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 216; Cahun, Disavowals, 31.

24 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 38, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 218; Cahun, Disavowals, 32.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Honor Lasalle and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Surrealist Confession: Claude Cahun’s Photomontages,” *Afterimage* 19, no. 8 (March 1992): 10–13. This groundbreaking essay was the first significant discussion of *Disavowals* in English. At this point, Lasalle and Solomon-Godeau overlooked the collaborative nature of Cahun’s and Moore’s work. In a later essay (“The Equivocal ‘I’”), Solomon-Godeau recognized the collaborative nature of the photomontages in *Disavowals* and called for more scholarship on the collaboration and its meanings.


For an excellent summary of this kind of imagery in relation to mainstream images of women and mirrors, see ibid.


See, for example, Jennifer Mundy, introduction to Claude Cahun, *Disavowals*, 216, n. 6.
Claude Cahun’s *Aveux non avenus* says “No” to Venus. The title of the book can be read phonetically as a “Veux non à Venus,” or a “Wish no to Venus.” Reading the title in this way shifts our attention from the interpretation of Cahun’s *Aveux non avenus* as an anti-autobiography and toward seeing it as rejecting the mainstream constructions of femininity, beauty and love associated with the ideal emblematized by the goddess Venus. Indeed, the photomontage and texts of chapter III directly engage with the figure of Venus as an emblem of idealization. They explore the problem of idealization as an epistemological strategy that is central to human understanding but also see it as aesthetically, socially, psychologically and sexually repressive. In the photomontages and writings of *Disavowals*, Cahun and Moore launch a critique of idealization that is directly connected to cultural debates about gender, sexuality and psychology in France between the wars.

The photomontage that opens chapter III (Figure 3.1) contains two images of Venus. First, on the left, an upside-down photo of the Venus de Milo, a sculpture in the French national collection that was emblematic of the feminine ideal and was used as such in mainstream and avant-garde work alike. Second, both the photomontage and the text refer to the Venus of Knidos by Praxiteles, which perhaps more than any other sculpture in existence represented the Venus pudica, or modest, chaste type of Venus. If we look closely at the statue on the right of the photomontage, we see that while its sandaled feet and flat chest look masculine, its penis appears to be broken off. Furthermore, the head of this statue looks very much like the head of the Venus of Praxiteles. If so, Cahun and Moore appear to have montaged the body of a male ephebe with the head and perhaps the drapery of a Venus. Aside from these two references to Venus, all of the human figures in the photomontage are portraits of Cahun. The classical sculptures can be seen to allude to issues of gender and sexuality. On the one hand, the statues on the edges of the photomontage appear to be gendered—the Venus de Milo, the female, is on the left. At the right, as we have seen, the semi-draped figure combines what appears to be the female head of a Venus with the body of an ephebe (who has nevertheless lost his penis), thus possibly
3.1 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Faceplate for Chapter III entitled E. D. M. in *Aveux non avenus*, 1930.
referencing the hermaphroditic aspect of Venus before her birth from the sea. While the gender of this figure is ambiguous, both sculptures appear fraught with gender signifiers when compared with the four images of Cahun at the center. And these, by contrast with the statues, appear stripped of such signifiers.

Chapter III of *Aveux non avenus* is preceded by an epigraph that poses an ironic question: “Surely you are not claiming to be more a pederast than I? ...”3 (“Tu n’as pourtant pas la prétention d’être plus pédéraste que moi? ...”). This question might immediately confuse any reader assuming that, since the text is written by Cahun, the question is hers. For the term “pederast” describes a male homosexual. Having read the question—“Surely you are not claiming to be more a pederast than I? ...”—the reader turns to the next page and sees the photomontage that opens the chapter in which Cahun is repeatedly pictured. Initially, Cahun seems to be ironically suggesting that she herself is more of a virile male homosexual than her interlocutor. However, the “I” who is depicted in the four photographic busts at the center of the photomontage does not appear to be conventionally masculine or feminine. The reference to pederasty begins to make a kind of sense when taken together with the classical statues that frame the photomontage. My point here is that the term “pederast” evokes a particular set of debates about sexuality and art in France between the wars, and Cahun surely chose it carefully. In twenty-first-century English, the term “pederasty” connotes an erotic relationship between a man and an underage boy. However, in France between the wars, its meaning was both more and less precise. One the one hand, “pederast” was used as a synonym for homosexual by many writers. On the other hand, the pederast was a particular kind of virile male homosexual whose ultimate model was to be found in ancient Greece.4 Is the epigraph to the chapter, then, another example of Cahun taking up the role of a gay man as she did in the context of her relationship with Bob in the first chapter of *Disavowals*? The homosexual aspects of the ancient world, while eliminated from mainstream aesthetic theory, were central to the interest in classical culture among the homosexual subcultures of France between the wars. Cahun was not only aware of this; she actively evoked this classical homoeroticism in writings produced prior to *Aveux non avenus* which I will discuss later.

Immediately, then, the epigraph and the photomontage together evoke contemporary notions of homosexuality. Cahun’s question, “Surely you are not claiming to be more a pederast than I?” also evokes homosexuality as a form of being by asking who is essentially more or less a pederast. In doing so it engages with important shifts in the understanding of homosexuality at the turn of the century. As Michel Foucault has discussed, in the late nineteenth century the new medical approach to sexuality led to an essentialization of homosexuality according to a set of medical criteria. Whereas previously homosexual activity was understood as a set of marginal practices, now “the homosexual” as a kind of being was invented.5 Defenders of homosexuality described it not as a vice acquired as a result of social circumstance, but a congenital state. In the 1860s Carl Heinrich Ulrichs described the “urning” as a special type of normal man. In England, Edward Carpenter used the term “intermediate sex” to describe a person with a psychological blending of masculine and feminine. Magnus Hirschfeld, a German physician who led a vigorous homosexual rights campaign
in the late nineteenth century, “insisted that homosexuality was not a perversion but a distinct variation of masculinity which was embraced by about 3 per cent of the population.”\(^6\) Havelock Ellis, whose *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897–1928) was hugely influential, described homosexuality as a congenital, not an acquired, condition and used the term “inverted” to describe homosexuals. Cahun translated a portion of this study into French.\(^7\) In addition, she regularly attended teaching lectures in psychiatry with her friend, the writer Henri Michaux.\(^8\) We can imagine that she was not only aware of, but critically engaged with, these sympathetic accounts of homosexuality, which described its various forms as forms of *being*.

In light of this context, where the essentialization of homosexuality is being mobilized in both its defense and its demonization, her question, which poses the issue of pederasty in terms of being more or less a pederast, seems doubly deconstructive. For, in the photomontage, Cahun not only situates herself between poles of gender and inversion; she also inserts herself at the crux of morality. At the bottom of the montage, we see the same three-quarter view of Cahun, this time with angel’s wings.\(^9\) That Cahun has transformed her androgynous self into an angel begins to make some kind of sense when we take account of the notion that angels were themselves imagined to be of indeterminate gender and sexuality. At the top center, protruding from the rectangle of the photomontage, an opposite to the angel is placed. In this photograph Cahun plays the role of the Satan, the angel who has fallen, corrupted and corrupting. The smaller image of Cahun’s head set into a horizontal rectangle is drawn from a portrait of Cahun dressed as Satan (Figure 3.2), a role she had performed in *The Mystery of Adam*—a medieval play produced by Albert Birot’s avant-garde theater group Le Plateau. This same head, in miniature and upside down, points up out of the top corners of the photomontage. In addition to placing herself between genders, then, Cahun has also portrayed herself as both angel and devil and in between. In this way, the photomontage and the epigraph bring gender and homosexuality together with the question of good and evil—with morality. We should recall that in the previous chapter in relation to neo-narcissism, Cahun evoked the possibility of “morality and other loves.”

While the epigraph and photomontage prepare readers for a consideration of homosexuality and morality, they also raise another issue that is central to Cahun’s meditations in this chapter. Each, in its own way, points to classicism as a pivotal issue. What is more, the issue of homosexuality is paired with...
an evocation of classicism. Classicism is evoked most obviously by including the sculptures on the margin. The structure of the photomontage can also be described as “classical” at least by comparison with the previous plates of the book. Its structure is symmetrical and centrally organized. Images of Cahun, her head shaved, in three-quarter view and profile at the top and center, are inverted and reversed as they are repeated below. The four portraits of head and shoulders are overexposed, the detail drained out of them. Thus, especially when paired with the classical sculptures, they remind one of portrait busts of classical antiquity, but busts that have been eviscerated. The images of Cahun’s bust are decidedly androgynous. Stripped of all conventional signs of gender—no hair, clothing or makeup, even brows and lashes seem to be missing—the overlapping images of Cahun are indeterminate. The images of Cahun contrast with the small inverted sculptures on either side, which evoke the female, male and hermaphrodite, questioning the polarities of gender identity and heterosexuality. The sculptures wittily refer to the “perversion” of sexual roles through their inverted states. Yet the images of Cahun refuse identification with either of them. Perfectly symmetrical and contained in a rectangle, they contrast like white marble against the darker background. In this montage, Cahun “classicizes” herself in order to call into question the processes of idealization associated with classicism.

Just prior to the publication of Disavowals, the connection between classical culture and homosexuality had been highlighted by the most famous and scandalous literary defense of homosexuality between the wars, André Gide’s Corydon. It is notable that in this epigraph the speaker implicitly values being a pederast. The beginning of the sentence “surely you are not claiming” makes it clear that s/he takes up the role of the ultimate pederast, and dismisses the implied interlocutor’s claims to be more of a pederast than s/he. There are multiple interlocutors imagined by the speaker of the epigraph. One of them, to whom I shall return in a moment, is André Gide, a writer with whom Cahun engaged both indirectly and directly throughout the making of Aveux non avenus. But Cahun’s question, and the photomontage with which it is associated, also speak to wider cultural understandings of classicism. To raise the specter of pederasty while picturing one of the greatest works of classicism in the French national art collection, the Venus de Milo, is to remind readers that dominant ideas of classicism can only be maintained when “problematic” aspects of classical culture are kept hidden. Indeed, the combination of the epigraph and the photomontage seems intended to evoke a wider series of debates on homosexuality, morality and the classical heritage that played an important role in defining French culture between the wars.

In their writings, social historian Carolyn Dean and art historian Amy Lyford have illuminated the degree to which cultural anxieties resulting from the trauma of the First World War were projected onto the issue of homosexual masculinity. Lyford observes:

After the war ... writers, critics and politicians explicitly contrasted pornography and male perversion with idealized images of robust postwar masculinity for social or political gain. Men who had been through the war and had not become homosexuals or “perverts” were viewed as symbols of national reconstruction, whereas men who acted in “deviant” ways were increasingly subjects of analysis and pathologization in the medical literature.10
As Dean describes it, pornography and homosexuality “were invested with a psychic and cultural charge so forceful that critics perceived them as capable of unbinding the impermeable body, and with that body, the social world of metaphorical territories and boundaries fashioned in its image.” Homosexuality was seen by many as a threat to the national body—to the possibility of the reconstruction of France between the wars that the legislature was trying to promote using policies of pronatalism (as we saw in Chapter 1). Significantly, this anxiety about male homosexuality is specifically addressed by Cahun when she chooses the phrase “more pederast than I” rather than simply saying “more homosexual than I.”

The threat posed by homosexuality was perceived as much in the cultural domain as it was in real relations between people. No account of homosexuality would have been more important to Cahun than the literary defense of pederasty presented by André Gide in his book *Corydon* (1924). Gide’s text focused on pederasty as a set of practices undertaken by virile men. Angus McLaren describes Gide’s text as both a rejection of the notion of homosexuality as a state of being and a defense of pederasts in the face of the homophobia of the *rappel à l’ordre*:

> In post-war France the homophobic asserted that homosexuality was an emasculating German vice which threatened the nation with depopulation. Even some homosexuals accepted the Freudian notion that they were narcissists stuck at an early stage of maturation process... In *Corydon* Gide responded to such beliefs by an idealized depiction of the sexual mores of ancient Greece. Clearly hostile to the *fin-de-siècle* medicalization of deviancy, he defended male homosexuality by falling back on the classic notion of a perfect world that once existed of martial and virile men in which women were respected and protected. According to his account, virile homosexuals had actually revered motherhood. Although they had a passion for boys, that in no way prevented them from marrying and raising children. Such masculine men were not to be confused with morally inferior, effeminate “inverts.”

Yet, despite *Corydon*’s presentation of the possibility of a virile, male, non-threatening homosexuality, Gide’s work and that of other homosexual writers was seen as a major cultural threat. As Amy Lyford points out, by the mid-1920s, many cultural critics acknowledged that a new genre, “*la littérature homosexuelle*,” had emerged. At this time, the conservative literary journal *Les Marges* circulated a survey of “homosexual literature,” and published the results in 1926. Given that the findings included attacks on Cahun’s close friend René Crevel, and her literary touchstone, André Gide, it seems likely that she would have been aware of this issue of the journal. Lyford summarizes the findings of the survey published by *Les Marges*:

> Not only did a genre of homosexual literature exist, but it seemed to be turning into a marketable commodity. Commentators tried to surmise the causes of this new aesthetic and decided that 1) the war had forced men to spend too much time together, causing them to seek comfort and solace in one another’s company; 2) the postwar emphasis on sport (the Paris Olympics had just taken place in 1924) increased male-to-male physical contact; and 3) women, particularly *les garçonnes*, were looking and acting more like men, so a heterosexist logic demanded that men would “naturally” find other men sexually desirable. The masculinization of the female body à la garçonne—the garçonnes’ adoption of so-
called homosexual aesthetics by cutting their hair, slimming down their bodies, forgoing motherhood, and pursuing athletics—was thus blamed for the rise of a homosexual subculture. Because women now looked more like men, men were beginning to desire themselves, and each other, narcissistically.14

Thus the “problem” of homosexuality was linked in the cultural imagination to the trauma of the war, and homosexual men, together with les garçonnes, were thought to pose a particular threat to the cultural order. The emergence of a homosexual literature that had begun with Proust’s Sodom and Gomorrah (1922), and had been taken up by André Gide, was thought to be another manifestation of national decline. This is the impetus behind many of the responses to the survey on homosexuality in literature.

However, this threat was imagined to come not only from mainstream literature but also from the visual and literary avant-garde. Indeed, the conservative critic Camille Mauclair (who had written a Symbolist account of Narcissus at the turn of the century) saw the same threat emerging from both la littérature homosexuelle and Surrealism. And it is especially pertinent that in naming the signatories of the Surrealist Manifesto (what he called the “infected manifesto in which the Surrealists spat on France”) Mauclair names René Crevel, a gay man who was a friend to Cahun. As Amy Lyford explains:

Mauclair’s attack relied on a crucial assumption. In his mind, surrealism and homosexuality were related cultural phenomena that had the potential to disrupt, or “infect,” the social and cultural order of France. Like German soldiers, homosexual men and the surrealists threatened French virility. Unlike the alien “Boches,” [a demeaning term for Germans] however, surrealists and male homosexuals threatened the nation from within, like a disease.15

In the face of these “threats,” the reconstruction of France was to be undertaken as much in the cultural as in the social or economic domains. This cultural reconstruction, commonly referred to as the rappel à l’ordre, was expressed in the visual and literary arts through a reinvigoration of the classical heritage that conservatives in France saw as the true line of Frenchness. Since the late nineteenth century, conservative cultural critics had been tracing the French cultural heritage back through the Italian Renaissance and into ancient Greece and Rome. Academic training in both literature and the arts had traditionally been dominated by study of the classics. This began to unravel in the mid-nineteenth century, and by the end of that period was overtaken by avant-garde movements such as Impressionism in painting, Symbolism in literature, and the various avant-garde movements that followed. After the war, however, there was a call for a “return to order” and to the idealizing impetus of French classicism. In the first postwar issue of the Nouvelle Revue Française, for example, Jacques Rivière claimed: “We think we can perceive a direction to which the creative instinct of our race, as new and hardy as ever, is in the process of committing itself … we will speak about everything that seems to forecast a classical renaissance.”16 And in 1924, the critic Edmond Viollier wrote an article titled “Toward a Classical Order—Classical Technique,” in which he saw the true and appropriate French spirit embodied in an idealizing classicism that rejected the contingency and individualism of realist or impressionist methods for the classical technique of
idealization: “This conception,” he said, “which tends with all its young energies toward a liberation from the transitory and the exceptional—that is, from all individualism—necessarily implies a universality of number and duration ... This technique we define as ‘classical’ ....” The critic defines an opposition here between the “transitory,” “the exceptional,” “individualism,” and the absolutes of “universality” and “number,” which he associates with the “classical.” His version of the classical is an updated account of traditional academic notions of the Ideal. The artist genius was imagined to intuit the ideal and thus present in his art a perfect vision that stood as an antidote to the messy and idiosyncratic phenomena of the material world. Many artists experimented with this new classicism, and it manifested itself in many forms, from paintings like Picasso’s *Three Women at the Spring* (1921, which alludes to the French precursors Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Nicolas Poussin, to the work of the artists of L’Esprit Nouveau that relies on abstract synthesis, order and simplification. Without wishing to suggest that these works are themselves similar, I simply want to claim that they were seen by many critics as “proof” that a healthy classicism was returning to France to combat the realisms, Dada and Surrealism that threatened French culture.

There are several crucial points here: first, that there was a “call to order” that was seen as part of the reconstruction of France after the war and that this imperative had a classicisizing and idealizing impetus; second, that along with that call to order went the rejection and scapegoating of people, habits or cultural products that did not accord with that ideal. The description of a “deviant” culture helped to reinforce, by opposition, the cultural ideal. Thus the deviance of homosexuals and avant-garde cultural practices was discursively produced in order to help define (or, better, create) a notion of the cultural ideal. Clearly, Cahun would have identified herself as an individual who did not fit with the cultural ideals associated with the call to order. And I believe that Cahun was all too aware of the operations by which people like her—who reveled in being the exception, the individual—were refashioned in discourse into an image of deviance and grouped together as a dangerous class. Taking account of this context, where classicism was associated with reconstruction, and homosexuality and avant-garde cultural practices were imagined as insidious threats to French virility, allows us to see the epigraph and the photomontage that open chapter III of *Disavowals* as all the more audacious. For in them, Cahun clearly intended to intervene in these discourses. In the photomontage and texts of chapter III, Cahun evokes the discourses of classicism and associates them with the discourses of homosexuality. Each infects the other—intersects with the other—in a manner that threatens clear distinctions. In the text of chapter III, Cahun examines the operations that attempt to keep “the ideal” apart from its “others” from a structural perspective. First, she questions the validity of both positive idealization and negative fixing in deviance. Second, she looks at processes of idealization on the level of personal relations and points to its consequences. In the chapter as a whole, we see an argument against the operations of idealization, be it in personal relationships, in aesthetic strategies or in the wider cultural realm. This argument permeates the chapter, from the imagery and structure of the photomontage, to the long love poem that opens the chapter, to the short passages on “Sodom, City of Light” and the “Fourth
Dimension,” to a longer fable at the chapter’s end. All of these evoke cultural expectations that depend on the moral ideals associated with reconstruction. And, in them, such idealization is undermined.

Gide and Pederasty

Cahun came to debates about homosexuality first in a literary context, a specifically Symbolist and Aestheticist context through which she imagined her own aesthetic potential as well as her identity. As Tirza Latimer explains, “the adoption of antiquity as a reference, while redolent of mainstream high culture and the interwar rappel à l’ordre, would also have resonated with Paris’s gay subcultures where influential women and men of letters contributed to homophile reconstructions of antiquity from the turn of the century until the Second World War.” Even earlier than this, probably around 1913, Cahun had written a manuscript, which remained unpublished, which she called “Jeux uraniens” or “Uranian Games.” Cahun’s “Jeux uraniens” is a playful exploration of perfect love (amour amiticae) in short segments of prose. Its implied interlocutor, the “you” of the text, is Suzanne Malherbe. In its homage to Symbolism and Aestheticism combined with its deconstructive bent, “Jeux Uraniens” is a prelude to Aveux non avenus. The very title evokes both clinical writings on sexuality and literary contexts of Symbolism. On the one hand, the terms “uranism” and “urnings” were part of a vocabulary of homosexuality in the interwar years that also included the descriptions “pederasty,” “inversion” and the “Third Sex.” The term “urning” was coined by Carl Heinrich Ulrichs in the 1860s to describe “a special type of normal man, not a feminized male” or “invert.”

However, the term “urning” or “uranian” was used in France between the wars together with a variety of other terms to describe some homosexual types including lesbians. Equally important for Cahun’s purposes, the title “Uranians” was also taken up by a group of Victorian poets including Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds, Lord Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde. Classically trained, they probably derived their description of “uranian” poetry directly from Plato. Their uranian works were characterized by the poetic worship of beautiful young men in the idealized context of ancient Greece. We know that Cahun took a great interest in writers such as Wilde and the Aesthetic movement to which he belonged. She and Moore even had photographic portraits of Wilde and his lover and fellow poet, Lord Alfred Douglas, hanging in their Paris apartment in the 1920s (see Figure 0.7).

The title of Cahun’s early writing, “Jeux Uranians,” also references a text by André Gide titled Le Voyage d’Urien originally published in 1893 (in L’Art Independent) with illustrations by Nabis artist Maurice Denis. Le Voyage d’Urien, which Gide retrospectively described as the first “Symbolist novel,” follows the travels of Urien and his companions on a journey of spiritual discovery in which they encounter exotic lands and strange creatures. The text is vague and allusive, and the landscapes the characters encounter serve as the vehicles for describing the protagonists’ mental states, or “états d’âmes.” But Urien and his companions make this journey only to arrive at nothing; the book ends with a poem that
annuls everything that has come before it: “We did not made this trip;” “this entire book is a lie.” The title of the book alludes to its overall structure, since Le Voyage d’Urien (Urien’s voyage) also sounds like “Le Voyage du Rien” (The voyage of nothing). We can imagine the appeal that this Symbolist text—which both evocatively and allusively follows a narrative of self-discovery and ultimately annuls it—must have had to Cahun. Aveux non avenus is, like Gide’s Voyage d’Urien, a voyage of discovery that is ultimately disavowed or annulled. As we have seen, Cahun’s Aveux non avenus also makes such a pun in saying no to Venus and thus to the ideal. In both Cahun’s Disavowals and its precursor, “Uranian Games,” explorations of love, sexuality and art take place through a dialogue with her Symbolist precursors and with widely held cultural and social assumptions.

Love, sexuality and art figure prominently throughout Aveux, but perhaps nowhere more explicitly than in chapter III. As the epigraph makes clear, Cahun is staking her claim to the same territory occupied by the Uranian poets—“Surely you are not claiming to be more of a pederast than I?” But Cahun also has a more contemporary reference in mind when she asks this question. For in the mid-1920s André Gide published his most controversial work, a work dealing explicitly with “pederasty:” Corydon. The book was published in 1911 and 1920 in two small, private, unsigned editions. Finally, in 1925 Corydon was published publically in a signed, commercial edition that caused somewhat of a scandal. While we can be sure that Cahun would have paid attention to the uproar that surrounded the public release of Corydon, there is also good reason to surmise that Cahun might have had access to the earlier private editions given the fact that Marcel Schwob, Cahun’s uncle, was both a friend of Gide and a gay man. He would likely have been among the circle in which such private editions circulated. Indeed, we know that in the early 1920s, Cahun corresponded with Gide about a manuscript of hers that he had read, which must have been either “Jeux Uraniens” or early drafts of the writings that would ultimately make up Disavowals. In any case, we can be sure that Cahun would have sought out Gide’s text once it was commercially published and readily available. We know that Cahun was a great admirer of Gide’s work.

There are many reasons to link Cahun’s Aveux non avenus to Gide’s Corydon. First, and foremost, the general subject would have been of interest to Cahun, whom we know actively sought out models for her own subjectivity and aesthetic practice among male homosexual writers of the previous generation. Corydon consists of four dialogues between the first-person narrator of the text, a heterosexual man, and his former friend, Corydon, whom he has not seen for ten years because “the deplorable reputation his behavior was acquiring kept me from seeking him out.” The narrator’s interest in reacquainting himself with Corydon is stimulated by current events. In particular, Gide’s narrator describes how “a scandalous trial raised once again the irritating question of uranism.” The narrator, “realizing that reason rather than temperament was alone qualified to condemn or condone,” decides to “discuss the subject with Corydon. He, I had been told, made no objection to certain unnatural tendencies attributed to him; my conscience would not be clear until I had learned to what he had to say in their behalf.” Corydon, it turns out, is in the process of writing a defense of “pederasty,” the main points of which he explains to the narrator.
Gide’s purpose in these dialogues is to put his readers (of all sexual persuasions) in the shoes of his narrator so that they will reconsider their attitudes towards homosexuality. As Lucille Cairns points out, “Corydon seems designed less to preach to the converted or to convert the adversary than to perturb and force into self-appraisal orthodox thought on homosexuality.”26 Gide wrote in his preface to the second edition of the book in 1920: “I am trying to explain what exists. And since in most cases no one is willing to admit that such things exist, I am examining, I am trying to examine, whether it is really as deplorable as it is said to be—that such things exist.”27 It is worth noting that, for Gide, pederasty does not involve an older man’s exploitation of a passive younger man or boy, and that our twentieth-century understanding of the term has little purchase on Gide’s or Cahun’s uses of the term.

Cahun embraces many elements of Gide’s dialogues about sexuality. Corydon has an ancient source. The main character’s name is drawn from Virgil’s Second Eclogue and alludes to a shepherd, Corydon, who is in love with a younger shepherd named Alexis. Corydon’s ideal pederast is self-accepting and proud. Cahun would have admired these characteristics. Corydon embraces a notion of freely and individually chosen love modeled on ancient Greek ideals. In addition, one of Corydon’s central claims about homosexuality is that can be “normal” and “natural” and is not necessarily pathological or sick. Each of these elements of Gide’s text would have appealed to Cahun.

In addition, Cahun would have been interested in the fact that the narrator’s reacquaintance with Corydon is instigated as a result of a scandalous trial. In 1918, Cahun herself had written about a trial that brought together Oscar Wilde’s homosexuality, lesbianism, perversion and national panic. Like the suit described in Corydon, the libel suit brought by the dancer Maud Allen against the tabloid the Vigilante was the talk of Paris. The Vigilante, which was edited by Noel Pemberton Billing, had published an article titled “The Cult of the Clitoris.” The article attacked Allen, who was to perform in a private showing of Oscar Wilde’s play Salomé, which had been banned in England, suggesting that the performance was part of a German wartime plot against the British. During the trial, the article’s author claimed that he had seen a “Black Book” containing the names of 47,000 English “perverts” who could be used as secret agents. The Germans would, it was suggested, use “sodomy, sadism and lesbianism ... to bring the English people into ‘bondage’.”28

Cahun wrote about the trial in an article titled “The ‘Salomé’ of Oscar Wilde, the Billing Trial and the 47,000 Black Book Perverts” that was published in the Mercure de France.29 She suggested that the Vigilante article took aim not only at Allen but at “all the admirers of Wilde, even those with a mild interest in him,” thus implying that from the point of view of the Vigilante article’s author, anyone who sympathized with Wilde (the homosexual) was a corruptor of morals. In addition to its implicit attack on what we might today describe as queer sexuality, Cahun saw the article as a general attack on artistic and intellectual freedom: “one will find here, the thesis of these puritans who, invoking a state of war want, under the guise of a reform of customs, deny all freedom of artistic expression and of thought.”30

If the general subject of Corydon would clearly have interested Cahun, there are also specific aspects of Disavowals that seem to refer to Gide’s text.
For example, it is noteworthy that Corydon was first published with the title “C. R. D. N.;” this use of initials is adopted by Cahun in the chapter headings for Disavowals and combined with English-language parenthetical descriptions. Chapter I is titled “R. C. S. (fear);” chapter 4 is entitled “E. D. M. (sex);” and so on. The last chapter of the book uses this technique to pun with the acronym “I. O. U. (self-pride).” Only chapter II diverges from this formula (“Moi-même [self-love]).” Gide’s initial title of his book, C. R. D. N., works as a phonetic homonym of “Corydon.” Tirza Latimer observes in her essay for the 2011 Cahun retrospective exhibition that the initials that open chapter III, E. D. M., when pronounced in English (a language in which Cahun was fluent) sound like “idem,” Latin for “the same”—a term that in academic citations can be used to designate a repeated source.31 Seen in this light, the title of the chapter references not only Gide, but also the notion of homosexuality—or “same sex.” The notion that this format might be intended to direct readers in the know to the connections with Corydon is reinforced by Cahun’s epigraph to chapter III: “Surely you are not claiming to be more a pederast than I? ….” For the effect of the dialogues in Corydon is not only to defend homosexuality but to distinguish between different kinds of sexuality and homosexuality. Corydon can be seen as a defense of what Gide calls “pederasty,” and it marshals that defense at the expense of other terms that describe homosexuality—lesbianism, “inversion,” “the third sex” etc. Indeed, in his preface to the third edition of the book written in 1922, Gide included a footnote regarding this issue:

The theory of the woman-man, of the Sexuelle Zwischenstufen (intermediate degrees of sexuality) advanced by Dr. Hirschfeld in Germany quite some time before the war—and which Marcel Proust appears to accept—may well be true enough; but that theory explains and concerns only certain cases of homosexuality, precisely those with which this book does not deal—cases of inversion, of effeminacy, of sodomy. And I realize today that one of my book’s great shortcomings is in fact its failure to deal with them, for they turn out to be much more common than I had previously supposed.

Even granting Hirschfeld’s theory accounts for these cases, his “third sex” argument certainly cannot explain what we habitually call “Greek love;” pederasty—in which effeminacy is neither here nor there.32

Gide contrasts “inversion,” in which the homosexual is imagined as “a type of person who belonged to one sex as far as his or her body was concerned, but who belonged mentally and emotionally to the opposite sex,” with “pederasty,” where the homosexual identifies with virile masculinity but is attracted nonetheless to young men (who may be seen not to have fully taken up the role of men—remaining in their youth somewhat feminine).33

The epigraph to chapter III is not only an homage to Gide’s most controversial book, but also a challenge to some of its premises. For, despite its frank treatment of a taboo subject, Corydon was far from forward-thinking on issues of gender and lesbianism. Indeed, while Gide himself described Corydon as his most important and socially useful book, modern critics have characterized it as both “homophobic and misogynistic.” Michael Lucy observes that the dialogue we witness when reading Corydon takes place between “the ‘I’ of the text (‘a frequently boorish, utterly un-Gidean bigot,’ as Richard Howard describes
him), and the eponymous Corydon, virile enough to imagine writing a defense of pederasty that would necessarily exclude ‘inverts, sick men.’” In asking her question in the epigraph, Cahun seems to be ironically taking to task the definition of “pederasty” advanced by the character of Corydon as well as the notion that there are better and worse forms of love. As a woman who rejected traditional gender roles and fixed sexual definitions, Cahun would clearly not fall under Gide’s definition of pederasty. Cahun’s ironic epigraph, together with her photomontage and texts in chapter III, wittily questions the kinds of distinctions about sexual definitions advanced by Gide’s protagonists. While Corydon presents arguments that counter traditional ideas about sexuality, Gide’s defense of pederasty also involves the idealization of homosexuality—the weeding out of those forms of homosexuality in which effeminacy plays too large a role.

Both the photomontage and the epigraph that introduce the chapter confuse and unmoor cultural ideals. Neither the dominant cultural ideals associated with the call to order of postwar culture nor the alternative presented by Gide and his like are acceptable to Cahun. If they have begun to be called into question at the opening of the chapter by the photomontage and the epigraph, they are further challenged in the texts that follow. Indeed, what connects this group of texts, which range from poems, to aphorisms, to fables, is that they are all, in one way or another, arguments against idealization.

Against Idealization

Cahun’s writings in chapter III revolve around themes of idealization, especially as it connects with love and sexuality. The chapter begins with the only poem in the book, “Melancholy Pleasures.” The poem evinces Cahun’s interest in Symbolism and Aestheticism. It introduces, in a nostalgic and poetic form, the themes of art and sexuality that dominate the chapter. Cahun rejects Aestheticism’s idealization of love and the lover’s body, and redefines both love and art, introducing the mundane, the material and the incidental into the mix. This poem is followed by a series of four short prose paragraphs, each of which undertakes the détournement of some sort of accepted wisdom associated with art, love and/or sexuality. Finally, the chapter ends with a fable or fairytale addressing these same issues.

“Délectations Moroses”

“Melancholy Pleasures” is a relatively long poem divided into seven parts. Each is separated in Cahun’s text by a five-pointed star, and each is introduced by a parenthetical phrase that sets the theme, much like the chapters in the table of contents. They are titled “(forgetting),” another “(about forgetting),” “(about a difficult child),” “(about love),” “(about art),” and “(about a terrible moment).” Each section deals with the issue of remembered love and the search for objects, acts, visions or memories that might memorialize it. The central question of the
Cahun’s main character here is “the Actor,” an emblematic figure, comfortable in the predictable dissimulation of theater. The actor grapples with the impossibility of keeping hold of a memory of the real—struggles, that is, with the problem “of forgetting,” the title of this part of the poem. In the first stanza, we meet an actor on a stage. When the curtain is up, the Actor knows her part. But when the curtain falls in front of her, all bets are off. Now the Actor, alone...
with her “prey,” which still “palpitates” with life, loses her hold on that which she seeks: “it will escape me,” the “blurred crowd” “will disperse into the distance.” This is a general struggle of memory as vision in which the protagonist strives to grasp the details that are no longer before her eyes, “poring over a problem of insufficient givens.” Here, the phrase for “insufficient givens,” _données insuffisantes_, has multiple meanings. In the scientific sense it means “insufficient facts or evidence.” In philosophy it refers to basic assumptions upon which the rest of an argument is based. But the word _données_ also resonates with the “palpitating prey” to suggest the gift of heart that has been given to a lover. We soon come to realize that the Actor is struggling with the impossibility of adequately conjuring the memories of her love object—perhaps a former lover whom she cannot adequately remember, perhaps one who never returned her love, one insufficiently given.

In the next stanza, the poem reads: “I try my best to see her floating hair again/ shaded on the set, hairnet of stars/fine-spun network of the uncombed night.” Now, Cahun herself seems to speak in the first person, and it becomes clear that the hair has become a synecdoche for her lover, impossible to adequately conjure, a heaven impossible to disentangle from the dark. She becomes, in the Actor’s mind, a “hairnet of stars/fine-spun network of the uncombed night.” Cahun imagines herself attempting to conjure lost memories that might appear to her like a scene in a play. But each attempt to envision the loved one is futile. She grasps her “prey,” knowing that it will escape her. She cannot conjure adequate facts—“givens”—to recapture the memory she has lost. By the third stanza, it becomes apparent that she is attempting to conjure a particular person, via a vague and partial recollection of hair. The narrator laments, “In vain, my memory swells in vain.” Her memory cannot match the experience of the real on the other side of the curtain. Yet despite herself, as the repeated refrain suggests, she will attempt to conjure her in an idealized memory—in a hairnet of stars.

Later in the poem, in a section titled “About a difficult child,” Cahun addresses the function of idealization in the nuclear family. In particular, she alludes to the way that children are sometimes made, by their parents, into emblems of ideal love. Here is the passage:

Recognize in this son
the mysterious mixture
of seeds.
And when love has passed,
look upon this growing proof
meditate
and sorrowfully rejoice.
May a descending smile
explain and belie
this bitter crease of your mouth.
Be indulgent of your son;
care for him well, this hypocrite
decorate this memory (souvenir) which says so much,
give thanks to it:
You will be able to make us believe in worthy love
that in the past could never have been yours.
This portion of the poem again evokes the notion of idealization as dissimulation. Initially the reader is led to imagine that the son is a beautiful emblem of his parents’ love, “the mysterious mixture of seed.” Even when the couple no longer love each other, the child remains concrete proof that their love once existed: “when love has passed/look upon this growing proof/meditate/and sorrowfully rejoice.” Yet by the end of the poem we realize that the child is used by the parents as the vehicle for their own self-deception and a tool that allows them to continue to simulate a romance that never existed: “You will be able to make us believe in worthy love/that in the past could never have been yours.” Not only will the couple use the child as a false emblem of a love that never existed; they will hold him up to their peers as an example of “worthy love.” Cahun thus implies that the idealization of love through the child is a tool that reinforces social norms of heterosexual love. Cahun’s contemporary readers might well have seen this portion of the poem as a critique of extreme pronatalism that dominated French culture at this time.

Cahun’s exploration of love and idealization continues in the next part of the poem, which is titled “of love.” Here the protagonist describes a view of lovers seen on the street. Rather than being trapped in memory like the Actor at the beginning of the poem, they appear caught up in mutual obsession that prevents them from having any awareness of others:

(of love)
They passed close by me
the lovers,
more in love and purer than we ever were,
buried under a snowdrift of caresses.
They were oblivious of my presence,
my envy, admiration, or shock
They passed close without seeing me,
heedless, not noting my emotion.
...
Lovers, fear nothing from me:
My jealousy floats between you, undecided ...
It’s only your abstraction that I resent.

In this passage, it seems clear that the protagonist is herself idealizing the lovers, viewing them as “more in love and purer than we ever were.” She is jealous of the idea of love that they represent, for she feels that she cannot participate in it. Observing the lovers, Cahun suggests that they are merely an “abstraction,” reminding her of an ideal love that she doesn’t possess. These lovers, like the child discussed above, are instances of the impulse to idealization in the social realm. One idealizes lost loves in memory; parents see their children as emblems of their own love; loving couples appear to those who pass by them as emblems of perfect love. Cahun has an ambivalent attitude toward these idealizations. Her poem is both a melancholy celebration of them and a critique. The title of the poem, “Melancholy Pleasures,” acknowledges that one might take some sad pleasure in these inaccessible yet perfect visions. And each passage of the poem is both tinged with longing and embedded with critical rhetoric. In this sense, the poem takes further the deconstruction of romance that we saw in the first
chapter of *Disavowals*. Indeed, each of these passages evokes and casts a critical eye on the idealized forms of love upon which the social fabric depends.

In the following passage, “on art,” Cahun explores the parallels between idealization as a manifestation of love, and idealization as a source of art. Just as loved objects are idealized by their lovers, so too are “marble statues” abstractions and idealizations of artist’s models:

> These marbles firm and polished  
> more than the most highly pumiced skin,  
> these white and svelte bodies  
> better than the finest ephebe,  
> muscles dear to sculptors ...  
> —Haven’t they ennobled their models?  
> I grant that these cold nobilities  
> discourage audacious lovers ....  
> —And yet! Lucien of Samosata would say.  
> But for those who humanely seek  
> the evocation of memory,  
> what a relief these tangible images provide!  
> Art is the very greatest morose delight  
> a sad and tender attempt to immortalize our pleasures,  
> to remember past loves.

In the first stanza Cahun mouths the traditional view of art as an idealization of the real. The marble is more “firm and polished” than “the most highly pumiced skin.” The “white and svelte bodies” are “better than the finest ephebe.” This is a description of the kind of classical idealization that had a long tradition in French art. The artist’s job was imagined to be the creation of forms that transformed “the real” into an ideal that he was able to sense through his genius. This idealization was imagined to ennoble, and in the case of the nude human body, to transform it from a signifier of sexuality to one of “the True, the Beautiful and the Good.” Thus, after a description of classical idealization that, I would argue, is intended to refer us back to the photomontage with its classical sculptures on the margins, Cahun inserts a question: “—Haven’t they ennobled their models?”

The answer to this question is equivocal. First, we read, “I agree that these cold nobilities/discourage audacious lovers.” This line appears to reiterate the notion that classical idealization makes the nude body morally uplifting and accords with the association of classicism and the *rappel à l’ordre*. However, the following line, for the right kind of reader, would undermine this interpretation. Cahun’s speaker inserts an objection: “—And yet! Lucian of Samosata would say.” Here Cahun refers to the Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata (ca. 120–ca.190 CE) who made a specialty of mocking many schools of philosophy as well as Christianity and ancient literature. Lucian was much loved by Cahun’s uncle, the Symbolist poet Marcel Schwob, and we can surmise from this reference that Cahun was quite familiar with his writings. Lucian’s general approach was to parody high-minded writings by introducing the mundane and the vulgar in place of the ideal. In particular, in the *Erotes*, a dialogue about sexuality related to sections of Plato’s *Symposium*, Lucian’s characters specifically address the issue of whether the sculptures of the ancients have “ennobled their models” (to quote Cahun).
The themes of Lucian’s *Erotes* are closely connected not only with the questioning of idealization in Cahun’s poem, but also with the general problem of classicism in the photomontage and the chapter as a whole. For in *Erotes*, a homophobic character, Charicles, debates with the pederast Callicratidas about sexuality. As part of their discussion, they go to visit the Cnidian Aphrodite of Praxiteles. The Venus of Praxiteles is usually described as a prime example of the Venus *pudica*, a chaste, idealized, figure that transcends the sensual realm, giving its viewers access to Beauty that is morally uplifting. However, in the *Erotes*, rather than seeing the sculpture as an ideal form, each of the characters has a clearly sexual reaction to it, each in accord with his own sexual preferences. Whereas the homophobe Charicles “runs to it and kisses it feverishly,” the pederast Callicratidas “circles the statue and views it from the rear,” which, we presume, allows for the possibility of imagining it to be an image of an ephebe while also suggesting sodomy. Thus the statue gives each of its viewers their own particular experience in what historian of homophobia Byrne Fone has described as “an amusing enunciation of opposite desires.”

While Cahun was probably repulsed by the homophobia displayed by Lucian’s character Charicles, her reference to Lucian suggests sympathy with his argument against art and the ideal as tools for transcendence as well as his general skepticism of anything ideal or godlike. For in the next lines, Cahun gives a positive spin to the notion that such works of art might spur each individual to think of everyday, earthbound and sensual love:

But for those who humanely seek
the evocation of a memory
what help these tangible images are!
Art is the melancholy delight par excellence,
a sad and tender attempt to eternalize our affections,
to remember the love that passes.

Thus, Cahun’s poem asks the reader to ponder the relationships between memory and experience, and the connections between art and memory. In it she reverses the traditional aesthetic schema by which art is a transcendent idealization of imperfect nature, which, flaws removed, can give its viewers a glimpse of ideal, moral truth or ideal, moral beauty. On the contrary, the abstraction of Greek and Roman sculpture allows it to serve as a palimpsest for the projection of individual desire, for the “tangible” and “humane” specifics of memory and affection. If a work of art memorializes through abstraction, its function as the “melancholy delight par excellence” stems from the specific desires that each viewer brings to it, rather than from its successful creation of an ideal. Like the characters in Lucian’s *Erotes*, each viewer or reader will read the abstractions of classicism through her own memories and desires. The classicism that is initially described in “of art” is thus informed by individual desire and, through the reference to Lucian, with forms of desire outside of the norms dictated by the *rappel à l’ordre*. 
This revision of classicism and idealization is embedded in the very structure of Cahun’s plate for chapter III of Disavowals. For the medium of photomontage could be described as offering a structural parallel to the revisions to idealization professed in the poem. If, in the poem, Cahun proposes an alternative to the
“ideal”—an opposite to the absolute and transcendent image of perfection of classical academic art theory—in which the idiosyncratic memories and desires of individuals are key, her choice of photography is apt. For what is a photograph but a trace of a particular instance of a material fact? In her photomontages, Cahun manipulates the photographic material according to her own desire. In the photomontage we are considering here, Cahun seems to be performing the “other” to idealization, using herself as the model. As the photographs that were used to compose this montage show, Cahun is not so much idealizing herself according to a classical standard as stripping herself of characteristics.

To prepare for these photographs, Cahun appears to have shaved her head and removed her eyebrows and lashes. She poses against a background of black fabric, emphasizing, in the black-and-white images produced, the contrast between her white, marble-like flesh and the background behind her. In one (Figure 3.3), her head is shown in profile, emphasizing the hook of her nose and the sharp jut of her chin. In others (Figure’s 3.4, 3.5) she poses in a three-quarter view, head tilted slightly downward, her shoulders bared in emulation of a marble portrait bust. These images are montaged together with one reversed so that they appear to face each other obliquely. This combination is then inverted, reversed and the contrast heightened to form the rectangle of busts at the center of the photomontage.

The effect is less a transformation into ideality as prescribed in classical idealism than a stripping down of details that leads to highlighting the extreme idiosyncrasy of individual form shown in the photomontage. When contrasted with the classical sculptures at the margins, these images of Cahun appear as vague depictions of an idiosyncratic ugliness. They are intended, I think, to appear almost monstrous, the opposite of the ideal. And yet, because of their references to the classical bust, because of their stripped-down quality, they equivocate. If idealization is meant to be the transformation of the body away from the material particulars of the real, and toward a transcendent form of beauty, the photomontage removes the material particulars of the real to leave its vague outline. In doing so, however, it points even more consistently to the
particularity of Cahun’s outline, emphasizing her Semitic features. Thus, the underside of classicism, of the impulse to transform things from the particular of the individual to the general, is also suggested here to be a categorization by type. Cahun is a Jew, a woman without womanly characteristics, a “monster.” In posing thus, she references the underside of the classical rappel à l’ordre that found its manifestation in the anti-Semitism and fascism that would grow in France between the wars.42

Cahun’s deliberate evocation of the monstrous in the context of the ideal is emphasized by the fact that this image of overlapping torsos would be the basis of Cahun’s cover design for the novel *Human Frontiers* published by the Dada writer and eventual Surrealist fellow traveler Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes
in 1929 with Éditions du Carrefour, the same press that published *Aveux non avenus*. The photographs would also appear in the April 1930 issue of the avant-garde literary journal *Bifur*, which Ribemont-Dessaignes edited. On the cover, shadows on the head evoke close-cropped hair, and the figures appear less vague than androgynous. This sense is amplified by the designation of the black tank-top shoulder on the figure on the right. Above this head is written the phrase “do not be afraid to be devoured.” The book consists of three stories, each of which overturns moral values. Georges Sebbag sees a parallel between Cahun’s work and *Human Frontiers*, which he describes as recounting “three variants … on the same waking nightmare punctuated by cruelties by peers, the solitude of the individual and the insolent uselessness of God … [Ribemont-Dessaignes] evokes a apocalyptic utopia of liberation, like the community of women or the abolition of work, with bits of bravery in the acts of cannibalism.”43 When it was released, the novel was described in the literary review *Tambour* as plunging the reader into an unreal world characterized by a “cold sadism.”44 If there is a parallel between chapter III of *Disavowals* and *Human Frontiers*, it lies in the fact that both authors envision a better world achieved by the overturning of accepted categories and moral standards.

Parodies in Prose

The next sections of the chapter consist of short excerpts of prose. Here, Cahun passes quickly from the earnestness of the “Délectations Moroses” to wit, irony, even parody. The first, titled “Vocation,” also addresses the issues of beauty, art and sexuality, and is thus connected to the issues of the poem we have just discussed as well as to the photomontage. The passage opens with a series of questions that seem to be addressed to a beautiful person: “Does anyone have the right to be jealous of you? Who, in our time, is rich enough to possess you? Who would we permit to lock you up? You are too beautiful, too costly/dear [cher], too famous!” However, as the passage continues, Cahun’s description suggests that the “toi” here addressed is Beauty itself: “You are a public museum piece, public weal.” And now, the Venus of Praxiteles is explicitly referenced once again in terms that link back to the use of this figure in Lucian’s *Erotes*: “Do we dare condemn the Venus of Praxiteles for offering herself to everyone: nude, tempting, immodest—indifferent?”45 Here Cahun plays with traditional aesthetic ideas of idealization as a means to beauty. The Venus of Praxiteles is not the chaste Venus *pudica*, but rather “tempting, immodest.” Cahun’s description of Beauty, however, is anything but idealizing. She starts out evoking lust and materialism—jealousy, wealth and fame are the terms chosen to address the woman. When she turns to a specific description of the Venus Praxiteles, Cahun refuses to set her in the rarified world of aesthetics. Instead, Venus “offers herself to everyone: naked, a temptress, immodest.” Perhaps this is why when Cahun addresses the Venus, she uses “tu,” the informal version of “you:” “A-t-on le droit d’être jaloux de toi? Osera-t-on blâmer la Vénus de Praxitèle de s’offrir à tous: nue, tentatrice, impudique—indifférent?” The “toi” suggests the familiarity with which one would address a lover. Surely, if one were
addressing the ideal of beauty itself, the appropriate form would be “vous.” This
sexualized Venus represents the truth about such art, suggests Cahun, expresses
the link between art and sexuality, and the Venus here, as in Cahun’s poem, is
anything but “indifferent.”

This strategy of introducing the material, the bodily, or even the sexual into
that which is conventionally seen to be most abstract or moral is taken further
in the third détournement, which is titled “Sodome, ville lumière.” In this phrase,
Cahun calls to mind the description of Paris as “ville lumière,” usually translated
as “city of light.” In this description of Paris, the use of the adjective “lumière”
refers to the quality of brightness (referring to street lighting on the boulevards),
but also to the idea of “enlightenment,”—of Paris as an intellectual and artistic
center. This reference to Paris as “ville lumière” emerged in the eighteenth century
when it was the center for Enlightenment philosophy. Cahun’s replacement of
“Paris” with “Sodom” associates Paris with sexuality and homosexuality, thus
bringing the ideal image back to the material. However, calling Sodom a “city
of light” also suggests that the sexually liberated Sodom is itself enlightened.
Thus, the title alone wittily breaks down the traditional dividing lines between
sexuality, intellect and morality.

Cahun opens “Sodom, City of Light” with a reference to Victor Hugo’s poem
“The Fire from the Sky” (Le feu du ciel). Cahun writes:

We say “Fire from the Sky,” to simplify, just as we tell children that they are born in cabbages.
In reality, Sodom caught flame by itself as a result of the amorous relations of its inhabitants
with the Angels of the Lord God. This master of ceremonies, so stingy, only gave them one
couple—oh communism! ... It had to happen quickly. Rub two flints together, you will see
sparks fly! Dry wood on its own (if you know how to comport yourself) is inflammable.46

Hugo’s poem “Fire from the Sky” was first published as the opening work in
the volume Orientales. The collection was prefaced by an excerpt from Genesis
describing God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah with a rain of fire. The
poem elaborates on the biblical epigraph. It begins with a long, exotic description
of the two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, but it soon transitions to a description
of sexual debauchery: “Ah! Cities from hell, mad in their desires! There, each
hour, monstrous pleasures are invented”47 and finally the cities’ destruction once
the “lamps of debauchery” are out and the “last fires of celebrations, forgotten.”

Cahun draws on the metaphors of light and fire that Hugo uses in his
descriptions of the amorous celebrations that took place in the cities of Sodom
and Gomorrah. However, unlike Hugo, who sees the destruction of these cities
as God’s punishment for debauchery, Cahun imagines that the fire is actually
created in the cities and sent up to the sky by the ardor of bodies touching:
“In reality, Sodom caught flame by itself as a result of the amorous relations
of its inhabitants with the Angels of the Lord God.” Cahun suggests that the
very notion that fire rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah as a result of God’s
condemnation is a lie that springs from the cultural repression of sexuality. That
the sexuality in Sodom was with angels, who are traditionally associated with
purity, only emphasizes the degree to which Cahun wishes to overturn received
ideas. Now the depiction of Cahun’s torso transformed into an angel by the
addition of wings, prominently placed at the bottom of the photomontage, has
all the more resonance.
In “Sodom, ville lumière,” Cahun retells the story of Sodom in a positive light, thus overturning contemporary associations between sexuality, homosexuality and sin. She compares this falsification of the story of Sodom with the story told to children to explain, without reference to sexuality, where babies come from: “we say ‘Fire from the sky’ to simplify things, like telling children they were born in a cabbage.” In France, it was traditional to tell children that baby boys were born in cabbages (girls in roses). Such tales were, of course, a way of avoiding the truth that babies are born out of women’s bodies as a result of sexual contact. Similarly, Cahun suggests we say “fire from the sky” (we say God punished Sodom in a rain of fire) in order to avoid the fact that the fire was actually created by the heat and light of sexual bodies. Cahun implies that a similar fact of life, the existence of a loving homosexuality, has been avoided in descriptions of homosexuality from biblical times to the present.

In the next section of text, titled “Fourth Dimension,” Cahun continues the reference to angels begun in “Sodom, City of Light” and connects to the angel imagery in the photomontage:

My angel is often late. I willingly wait for it. But what is left of me, when it finally appears? A call. —Help! But why? Why have I called you (familiar form of you)? Tension, resistance. I fell asleep, paralyzed. I moved without knowing it: my crowd has pushed me … The angel arrives and the one, who, by its intervention could give us the universe or love, escapes me.48

In this passage, we are again given a scenario of frustration, this time on a physical level. We know from the previous passage of the potential for “loving contact with the Angels of the Lord God,” yet, when Cahun’s angel appears, she is “paralyzed.” When eventually physical movement comes, it is involuntary and unable to take hold of love, and the angel “escapes” her. Such, she seems to imply, is the predicament of love that remains culturally forbidden.

These intervening détournements link the philosophical and poetic approach to art and sexuality in the poem “Délectations Moroses” at the beginning of the chapter, and the tale Cahun tells at the end of the chapter. If, at the beginning of the chapter, Cahun uses the lens of the past for her nostalgic poetry, by the end of the chapter her text looks to the future. Titled “Clairvoyant,” the text tells a fable or fairytale that reverses contemporary mores about sexuality and gender roles. The heading “Clairvoyant” is also the name of the main character of the story who, in its course, is born, becomes a prince and eventually dies. The name and title both suggest that the tale is an ironic, and perhaps somewhat untrustworthy, prediction of things to come.

The story is prefaced by a paragraph that frames the world imagined in this tale. It reads: “Feminism is already with the fairies. Magicians will show our little boys that they no longer need these dry nurses. And life will be neither more continuous, nor more discontinuous as a result.”49 Cahun thus sets the stage for the story of a world in which, due to the magical discovery of two magi, women are no longer necessary for procreation, childbearing and childrearing. Now women, rather than acting as wet nurses, are “dry nurses.” Feminism is no longer necessary because women are no longer forced into the role of wife and mother. The fable imagines this strange world in order to ridicule contemporary
attitudes toward women and homosexuals. Like “Sodom, city of light,” the fable inverts the expected elements of the story, thus exposing their contingency.

When the story begins, we learn that the two magi “had lovingly watched the reproductive processes of a variety of animals, from anemones to men.” Cahun says, “They knew how to prepare the philosopher’s seed/semen (semence).” In this witty phrase, Cahun evokes the idea of the philosopher’s stone, the alchemical substance that can turn matter into gold and guarantee immortality, a process that was associated with purification or idealization. In Cahun’s text, however, it is not the philosopher’s stone but the “philosopher’s semen” that serves as an elixir guaranteeing immortality. Cahun describes the research undertaken to find this amazing substance in terms that are far from the ideal. For to imagine this research is to imagine the philosophers watching every kind of creature having sex.

As the story progresses, the two wise men choose to marry each other and, by the light of a full moon, invite all the magicians in the land to their wedding: “And having united in the traditional way, they deposited in the cradle, which had already been put there with great foresight, two little slugs.” The phrase, “having united in the traditional way,” could refer either to the marriage ceremony or to sexual union; clearly, this phrase is ironic since they are both men; readers of this fable imagining “traditional” unions would also imagine heterosexual unions. Cahun goes on to describe how “in the blink of an eye, they [the seed/slugs] mixed together, forming only one body. It was a completely ordinary seed (graine), a germinating, bursting, budding grain of wheat.” From this grain of wheat a “little man” begins to grow, transforms into a newborn, and then into a fourteen-year-old boy. The amazed crowd of onlookers chooses the boy as prince, and Cahun wittily observes, “the two husbands disappeared, fearing that they might place their son in an awkward position with such a questionable and controversial paternity.”

Next we learn that this youth’s relationships with women are fraught with difficulty:

Everyone loved him—especially women. The most beautiful virgins, fairies humiliating themselves, accomplished women, all solicited him in vain. He was repulsed by the female sex; their weaknesses were all the more apparent to him since he hadn’t had a mother to deposit, incubate, and hatch blind love in his heart.

This is the role of women, the only one that really matters to them: to inspire breast worship in the newcomer, whoever he is: black or white, ill-formed [informe/unformed] or deformed, made of ice, of fire, or of cinders.

All around the Prince the crafty besotted beings whispered, claiming that in them and them alone lay the mystery without mystery, the equivalent of this world with its reason for being, the phases of the tides, the pulsation of the soil, the orgasm of the planets, everything that he still found incomprehensible due to the influence of some evil spell.

In this section of the story, Cahun addresses contemporary attitudes toward women and femininity most directly. She mocks the mythology of femininity as “mystery,” the association of woman and nature (“the phases of the tides, the pulsation of the soil”), and the general notion of the femme fatale, by making...
the prince, Clairvoyant, see through their attempted use of traditional feminine wiles.

In addition, she calls into question the origins of “normal” sexuality by alluding to Freudian theories of anaclisis and object choice. Cahun writes, “their weaknesses were all the more apparent to him since he hadn’t had a mother to deposit, incubate, and hatch blind love in his heart.” The prince’s lack of a female mother and development without nursing (women are for him, now, what Cahun had called in the epigraph “dry nurses”) means that he has not undergone the conventional process of development. Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, which included both discussion of infantile sexuality and ultimate object choice, was translated into French and widely published in Paris in 1923.54 According to Freud, for the infant sucking at the breast, “the satisfaction of the erogenous zone is associated, in the first instance, with the satisfaction of the need for nourishment.”55 This initial attachment to the breast, or anaclisis, plays a major role in later sexual object choice. Cahun’s link between the prince’s lack of attraction to women, and the fact that he was not born from a woman or nursed by a woman, implies an interest in Freudian theory that is borne out by later references to Freud in other parts of *Aveux non avenus*. In addition to referencing Freudian theories about homosexuality, Cahun also subverts the notion that motherhood must therefore be the natural role for women, a role that they readily embrace. The tale continues:

This is the role of women, the only one that really matters to them: to inspire breast worship in the newcomer, whoever he is: black or white, ill-formed [informe/unformed] or deformed, made of ice, of fire, or of cinders.56

Free from the “breast worship” that would draw him to women, the prince sees through the ruses of the women who try to seduce him.

Cahun’s parody of women, “even accomplished women,” fawning over the prince and believing that motherhood is “the role of women, the only one that really matters to them,” goes beyond a critique of traditional ideas or Freudian theories. It seems also to be aimed at the most controversial literary treatments of homosexuality in the work of André Gide. For in addition to discriminating between good and bad forms of homosexuality, Gide’s *Corydon* discriminates against women. There are many aspects of *Corydon*’s misogyny, but Cahun seems to have been most interested in the role women are assumed to play with relation to reproduction.

The interlocutors in *Corydon* engage in a debate that relies heavily on the concepts of nature in understanding sexuality. On one hand, Corydon tries to convince the narrator that homosexuality is a natural instinctive occurrence, and that it has both healthy and unhealthy manifestations, just like heterosexuality. However, the argument from nature also relies on distinguishing between the natural roles played by men and women. Only a man can be committed to his art, whereas women are naturally devoted to their maternal duties: “Just as we saw the two forces, anagenetic and catagenetic, set in opposition to each other, in the same way we shall see two possible forms of devotion similarly contrasted: the male’s for his art, his sport, his song; the female’s for the race.”57 As Lucille Cairns points out, in *Corydon*:
Borrowing his terms from the influential French philosopher Bergson, Gide assigns to females an anagenetic role and to males a catagenetic role. The female will ensure reproduction and regeneration of the human race, while the male will enable variation ... Thus women are attributed an indispensable but mundane function, while men are posited as the source of far more pleasurable and prestigious activity: art, play, sport, song ... What is disturbing about Gide's schema is that it can be used to perpetuate the stereotyped idea that women cannot, or can only rarely, be creative, as opposed to procreative, that women artists cannot on the whole equal male artists.58

Cairns argues that Gide assigns women the “anagenetic role”—the role of reproducing in order to preserve the species—whereas men play a more creative, or “catagenic” role, the role of creating variation, of inventing both in reproduction and in “art, play, sport, song.” Significantly, throughout Corydon, pederasty is associated with the most accomplished forms of art. Corydon notes the “almost constant predilection of Greek art for the body of the boy and the young man.”59 Further, he states that “when someone decides to write a history of uranism in its relation to the plastic arts, it is not during the decadent periods that it will be observed to flourish, but quite the contrary, in the glorious and healthy epochs ....”60 Once we see that, for Gide, the pederast is the epitome of the artist, it becomes clear that Cahun’s interest in pederasty is connected not only to her concerns with homosexuality, but also to her desire to be taken seriously as an artist. Indeed, the entire chapter, together with the photomontage, demonstrates that Cahun does anything but preserve the status quo. Instead, she overturns it, redefining traditional terms as she creates her art. Understanding Gide’s equation of the pederast with the artist adds a further layer to our understanding of Cahun’s arguments in chapter III. First, the epigraph, “Surely you’re not claiming to be more of a pederast than I?” takes on a new valency. If the pederast is Gide’s model for the artist, then Cahun will be at least as much a pederast as Gide. Second, the fable of Clairvoyant, which imagines stripping women of their reproductive roles and leaving those instead to men, becomes all the more poignant, for it involves transferring the anagenetic, or human-race-preserving, role away from women.

Once they have been rejected by the prince, the women who pursue him can describe his repulsion only as the result of an evil spell. The prince, hearing the talk of an evil spell, begins to wonder about his origins and goes in search of his parents. He is easily able to find them, because “the two male seeds align themselves side by side and their alloy is a simple and stable combination.” (And here we are reminded of the “mysterious mixture of seed” referenced in the poem “of a difficult child” from “Melancholy Pleasures.”) The prince, as a stable combination of his parents, easily recognizes himself in them. Cahun plays up the homosexuality of the parents. She writes that the prince “has no hesitation at all in recognizing his father and mother—we’d better say: his parents.”61 This shift from the traditional “father and mother” to “his parents” emphasizes the overturning of heterosexual reproduction. Interestingly, Cahun contrasts the alignment of two males’ seeds in the prince with heterosexual reproduction, where “the double androgynous seed is a mixture of mysterious proportions; and this mixture can produce a new body, different than those that formed it, contrary, hostile to all attempts at closeness.” This description resonates with the misrecognition described between parent and child in the opening poem’s
section “(of a difficult child):” “Recognize in this son/the mysterious mixture/of seeds.” Whereas the imaginary “simple,” “stable” alloy created in the homosexual union of the magicians makes the prince naturally connected to his parents, the heterosexual union, the “mysterious mixture of seeds,” creates a child who is “different from those who had formed it, contrary, hostile at all attempts at closeness.” Thus, as we saw in the poem at the beginning of the chapter, in order to see the child as a “souvenir” of their love, the couple must “decorate” him, dissimulate, transform him into the vision that they want others to see.

The prince has just the opposite characteristic. He cannot dissimulate or pretend to feel something he doesn’t. Once he identifies his parents, he seeks aid for “the excess of frankness by which his senses render sterile everyone who approaches him and everything he touches.” The prince is apparently aware that there is something “wrong” with the fact that he feels no emotional or sexual attraction toward the women who pursue him. His parents are disappointed in his request for help, asking “You want illusion, my son?” They had conceived him in this unusual way in order to free him of the illusion that he should be naturally attracted to women. Nonetheless, they indulge his whim and offer him a magic gift that will restore this attraction: “Take this ring: it contains the missing seed, the one we wanted to spare you at birth.” The ring, which will give him romantic illusion, is associated with the female seed and femininity more generally. In the next line, Cahun describes it as an “engagement ring.” Now the prince, having both male and female seeds, has been returned to a state associated with more normative sexuality. However, the ring exaggerates normal illusions and causes him to fall in love with the first creature he sees, which, unfortunately, is a not a woman, but a sow: “What a chaste, ideal, and gracious vision! This can be nothing less than a goddess …” he cries. The text continues ironically, “For we always identify as chaste the things that affect us physically.” This exclamation resonates with the description of Praxiteles’ Venus earlier in the chapter. There, Cahun has reversed the usual attributes of ancient sculpture, describing Venus as “naked, a temptress, immodest—indifferent?” Clairvoyant’s description of the first creature he sees as chaste, ideal, and gracious resonates with common descriptions of high art, but these idealized descriptions are totally inappropriate for a sow. What is more, they belie the prince’s real feelings, which are sensual, even sexual. He is using the language associated with beauty, aesthetics and the mind to mask vulgarity and sexuality. The fable is thus linked not only to Cahun’s description of Venus in “Vocation” but also to the story of babies coming from cabbages in “Sodom, City of Light.” Unfortunately for the prince, he is deluded by the ring into taking a sow for a beauty. His fate is not pretty: “He threw himself at her … and the sow (for it was a sow) who had no prejudices, no bias against human flesh, after a short grunt of surprise and love, gulped down this unexpected truffle of a white and monstrous variety in one go. Then, having savored it slowly, assimilated it.” Here it is worth noting that the French world for truffle (truffe) also means “fool.”

The story of “Clairvoyant,” like all of the texts in chapter III of *Disavowals*, engages in a complex interplay of the issues of normative and non-normative sexuality, and links these to questions of truth and dissimulation. For Cahun, idealization is not a transformation toward the True, the Beautiful and the Good,
but a repressive lie. And the issues of truth and dissimulation are raised not only
to engage personal behavior, but to address larger questions about the definition
of art. Here, “idealization” is the key term—whether it be the idealization of
relationships to the standard of social expectations, or the idealization of the
material world in the work of art. For when that idealization leaves out the
everyday, the mundane, the out-of-the-ordinary—the fact that, as Gide had put
it, “such things exist”—it leaves out the very substance of what Cahun wants
to capture in her art. Idealization in the normative sense, which holds up as
legitimate only that which is culturally recognized as higher, is, as Cahun says in
the poem that we started with, a work of “insufficient givens.”

Like the texts we have just addressed, the photomontage that opens the
chapter proposes an alternative to the cultural ideals connected with idealization.
In place of the polarities of gender (the ancient sculptures) or the distinctions
between good and evil (angel and devil), Cahun and Moore put at the center
the photograph of a specific person—Cahun—stripped bare of the features that
might define her, or us, culturally as male or female, wealthy or poor, good or
bad. All of the cultural signifiers—hair, clothing and so on—are removed. And
yet here is a photograph, a trace of the real. Cahun proposes a new definition
of art, in which the “insufficient given” that will conjure memory is not the ideal
of polished marble that excludes those at the margins of the culture, but the
generalized, multiplied image of a body, Cahun’s own torso, poised at the edge
of the human frontier. As such, the chapter critiques and proposes alternatives
not only to dominant cultural paradigms of sexuality and art, but also to those
more marginal models found in the works of Aestheticism and André Gide.
For although those models presented Cahun with an alternative to normative
culture, they still did not open up an adequate space for her. What we will see
in the analysis of the following chapters of Disavowals is an attempt not just
to critique the dominant paradigms, but to propose alternative visions of art,
creativity, relationships and desire.

Notes

1 I am very grateful to Tom Conley for drawing my attention to this punning reference to
Venus in the title of the book after listening to my talk “From Cabanel to Claude Cahun:
More Manifestations of Venus” at the conference “Venus as Muse: Figurations of the
Creative,” University of Cologne, Germany, sponsored by the Center for Media Studies,

2 One thinks, for example, of Jean Cocteau’s film Blood of a Poet, where photographer Lee
Miller plays the role of the Venus de Milo.

3 Claude Cahun, Aveux non avenus (Paris: Éditions du Carrefour, 1930), 42, anthologized
in Cahun, Écrits, ed. François Leperlier (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 2002), 223. See also
Claude Cahun, Disavowals; or, Cancelled Confessions, trans. Susan de Muth (Cambridge,
MA: MIT Press, 2008), 35.

4 See Carolyn J. Dean, The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other
Fantasies in Interwar France (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press,
2000), 164.

McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality*, 94. Many of these writings have been anthologized in Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (eds), *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Cahun translated Havelock Ellis’s two-volume treatise *Woman in Society* for publication in French; the first volume, *La femme dans la société, 1: L’hygiène sociale, Études de psychologie sociale*, was published by Mercure de France in 1929.


There is some question as to the proper orientation of this photomontage. All recently published versions of it have the angel at the bottom and the classical statues upside down. However, in the copy exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago’s exhibition “Entre Nous: The Art of Claude Cahun” (2012), one of the more lavish versions with images tipped in, this photomontage is inserted in the opposite orientation with statues right side up and the angel figure on top upside down.


The English translation of *Disavowals* loses this distinction by translating “pederast” as “homosexual.” Cahun, *Disavowals*, 35.


Lyford, *Surrealist Masculinities*, 143.

Ibid., 144.


Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.


Cahun to Gide, May 27, 1923, Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, Fonds André Gide, Gamma 415–1. Thanks to Tirza Latimer for bringing this letter to my attention.


27 Gide, trans. Howard, Corydon, xxiv.


33 McLaren, Twentieth-Century Sexuality, 43.

34 Lucey, Gide’s Bent, 70.

35 Carolyn J. Dean, “Claude Cahun’s Double,” Yale French Studies 90 (1996), 91. Carolyn Dean argues that Cahun’s question in the epigraph ultimately points to the undecidability of identity as well as the difficulty of defining female, and particularly lesbian, desire: “The epigraph that precedes the chapter on ‘sex’ uses homosexuality to express the impossibility of knowing: ‘You don’t really think you are more of a pederast than I am?’ The lesbian who is more of a male homosexual than a male homosexual is simultaneously a manly woman (in cultural terms I assume Cahun is parodying) and a womanly (the womaniliest) man. Again, gender inversion in this context (she poses as a male homosexual) does not simply signify the transgression of normative gender roles, but marks the undoing of any stable binary distinction between genders or between gender and sexuality, and hence the undecidability—the mobility—of all identity. It is thus because female homosexuality is the privileged manifestation of the mobile immobility that constitutes normative, gendered subjectivity as a lost and yet indispensable referent that Cahun never names lesbian desire in her book. Lesbianism can only be marked through the body double—the paradoxical series of substitutions that renders (all) women’s desire commensurate and yet incommensurate with established systems of meaning and hence tangible but indecipherable.”


37 In Disavowals, the word “données” is translated as “gifts” and thus loses the themes of dissimulation and forgetting that are so central to this passage. See Cahun, Disavowals, 38.

38 This phrase is from the Neoplatonic philosopher Victor Cousin. On idealization in Academic art, see Jennifer L. Shaw, “The Figure of Venus: Rhetoric of the Ideal and the Salon of 1863,” Art History 14, no. 4 (December 1991): 540–70.

39 Lucian’s True History is widely believed to be the first work of science fiction. It describes a world “where men married men and carried babies in their thighs, and a world where Tree-men reproduced by cutting off and planting a testicle.” These stories seem to have a close relation to the fable “Clairvoyante” which appears later in chapter III. See Jennifer Michael Hecht, Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation,
Reading Claude Cahun’s *Disavowals*


41 Ibid., 66.


50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.


58 Cairns, “Gide’s *Corydon*,” 593.


60 Ibid., 87–8.


64 Ibid.


66 Ibid.

Mirrors of Femininity, Sensuality and Desire

A last-minute dexterity corrects a shadow, an imprudent gesture—and beauty is reborn. For in front of her mirror, Aurige is touched by grace. She consents to recognize herself. And the illusion that she creates for herself spreads itself to others.¹

I have found in my self-pride the philosopher’s stone of love. With it, I can accomplish the transmutation of joys: from signs, I’ll make sounds; from sounds, I’ll make scents, from scents, I’ll make kisses; from kisses, I’ll obtain caresses ...²

In chapters IV and V of Disavowals, Cahun and Moore critique conventional ideals of femininity while exploring how the body and sensuality are socially structured. Cahun was interested not only in rejecting traditional ideas of gender and sexuality but also in emphasizing the effect that these have on women. Chapters IV and V are in dialogue with one another in many ways. Each begins with a portrait of a woman. Chapter IV is titled “Aurige,” the name of the character around which all of the text revolves, and the first subsection is titled “Portrait.” Similarly, in chapter V, the first section of text is titled “Portrait of Mlle X.” The photomontages that open the chapters are portraits of a sort as well (Figure’s 4.1, 4.6) Like many of the montages throughout the book, they contain repeated images of Cahun. But these are far from conventional images of the female self. Their purpose is not to clearly delineate character or social status; rather, each seems intended to evoke the predicaments faced when issues of femininity, sensuality and feeling butt up against social convention.

The texts of these chapters also offer alternatives to traditional norms of femininity and desire. As the epigraphs I have chosen to open this chapter show, looking in her mirror, Aurige, the protagonist of chapter IV of Disavowals, presents an unusual portrait of feminine self-regard. Her encounter with her image is marked neither by narcissistic self-enchantment nor by inadequacy in the face of conventional standards of beauty, but by “grace” and self-acceptance: “In front of her mirror, Aurige is touched by grace. She consents to recognize herself. And the illusion that she creates for herself spreads to others.”³ This figure, Aurige, not only controls her image—creates her own, unconventional idea of beauty—but makes others recognize its legitimacy as well. In the character of Aurige, Cahun
4.1 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Faceplate for Chapter IV entitled C. M. C. in *Aveux non avenus*, 1930.
imagines an alternative universe in which subjectivity is not constrained and structured in advance by conventional images. A universe where bodies—even those that do not adhere to conventional morality—are inhabited from a position of joy, sensuality and love rather than one of shame—a world in which, with the help of “self-pride,” the immaterial and socially structured sign can be transmuted into sensual pleasure: “from signs, I’ll make sounds, from sounds, I’ll make scents, from scents, I’ll make kisses, from kisses, I’ll obtain caresses ….” Cahun’s portrait of Aurige before her mirror proposes an ideal of human subjectivity that is a far cry from what she describes in the following chapter, where another woman, Mlle X, presents the dilemma of femininity as social constraint. Thus, both chapters challenge conventional ideas of femininity and conventional associations between femininity, sexuality, sensuality and desire.

In their questioning of cultural ideals, the photomontages that accompany these chapters resemble Hannah Hoch’s Dada deconstructions of femininity—photomontages such as The Beautiful Girl (1919–20) or The Coquette I (1923–25). Certainly, Hoch and Cahun and Moore were all skeptical of conventional expectations of women. And they expressed this by reconfiguring femininity in their photomontages. However, while Cahun and Moore incorporate some ready-made elements, their images are dominated by photographs and graphics constructed (and deconstructed) by Cahun and Moore themselves. In addition, the photomontages are intended to be interpreted in conjunction with the text of Disavowals, and the relationship among the texts and photomontages of Disavowals is insistently dialogic.

The photomontage that opens chapter IV, “C. M. C.” (see Figure 4.1), emphasizes the senses of vision and touch. At the lower center, a pair of hands holds on to, or even proffers, a fuzzy mitten. The contrast between the bare hands and the mitten evokes the ideas of sensation and its lack: both the soft sensation of wool on the hand and the idea that the covered hand will not feel sensations from the outside. This is all the more true because the background of the photomontage is composed of a web of cactus pads with threatening spines grouped in threes. The bare hands are separated from the spines by the mitten, which thus appears to serve a protective function. (And yet couldn’t those spines pierce through its wooly surround?) At the center of the mitten, an image of Cahun is montaged to appear as if she is lying on her stomach, looking out, her face propped up on her hands, her elbows resting on the ground in front of her. Initially, she seems to hover in the space of the mitten, but a close examination of the montage shows multiple overlapping exposures and an impossible angle for the legs and feet.

At the left center of the montage, Cahun sports another set of hands holding a mitten. This is a repetition, in a smaller size, of the hands and mitten in the center foreground. This time, Cahun is shown from the waist up. The hands appear to be hers until we notice that the arms extend beyond Cahun’s elbows and thus hover in front of her. The figure of Cahun shimmers with reflected light, as if she is wrapped in cellophane that protects or separates her from the rest of the world and blocks her from immediate sensory experience. On her face a large pair of monstrous, unseeing eyes has been added, their pupils pointing upward. The overall impression is that, for her, any sense of touch or vision is impossible. From behind the mitten emerges a heart-shaped cactus leaf, replete...
with thorns, attached to something like an umbilical cord. If this is Cahun’s heart, it is both vulnerable and dangerous—exposed to the world on the outside of her body yet itself dangerous to touch. Toward the top of the photomontage, a huge cactus leaf mirrors counterposed images of the lower half of Cahun’s face. As with the image of Cahun wrapped in cellophane with monstrous eyes, in this image Cahun has no sight. Neither can the viewer know anything about what she sees. The edges of this leaf are threateningly adorned with cactus thorns. In this photomontage, relationships between the viewer, the bodies pictured, vision and touch are problematized.

In the upper-right and lower-left corners of the photomontage, a very different sort of imagery impinges on the rest of the scene. At the upper right,
an arm reaches into the scene. At the lower left we see a scientific chart, an administrative form and a collection of stamps. Each of these elements appears to be taken from ready-made sources, rather than created through Moore’s and Cahun’s photography and graphics. In addition, the corners of the photomontage appear to have a more direct relationship to the text in chapter IV. Initially, the arm appears to be a reproduction of a drawing of a man, perhaps a farmer, and resonates with the epigraph to the chapter that the viewer/reader will have just encountered: “Permit me to warn reckless young women: seeing the trap doesn’t prevent one from getting caught in it, and that doubles the pleasure.” The straps that extend from the hand resemble some kind of animal trap. Significantly, the figure of the cellophane-wrapped Cahun describes a diagonal from this arm with its trap. As the arm reaches in, it appears to be reaching toward her. Separated by a field of spiny cactus leaves, she remains unaware and indifferent. She doesn’t even see the trap, or perhaps she is caught in it. The senses of vision and touch are dramatically closed off here. Is this cellophane figure protected from the trap by her sequestration? Or does she represent one already trapped?

However, what we are looking at is, in fact, not a farmer’s arm but a fragment of the classical bronze statue the *Auriga of Delphi*, one of the best-preserved ancient Greek sculptures then known (Figure 4.2). This statue, which was originally part of a larger group representing a charioteer driving horses, was discovered by French archeologists in 1896 and was at the time part of the French national collection of ancient art. We can thus surmise that it would have been part of the French cultural imagination by the 1920s. Cahun and Moore chose to include a fragment of the *Auriga of Delphi* in the photomontage because they saw it as relating to the text. Indeed, the entire text of the chapter revolves around a person named “Aurige” (French for “Auriga”). However, as we shall see, the relationship between the image in the photomontage and Cahun’s character Aurige is far from straightforward. When used as a proper name, “Aurige” is assumed to designate a young man, since ancient charioteers were generally male, and the most famous, Auriga, inventor of the chariot and namesake of the star, was a young man/god, the product of a frustrated love pursuit of Athena by Hephaistos. Indeed, although the Auriga of Delphi is clearly male, the viewer will eventually come to learn that Cahun’s Aurige is a woman.

**Mirrors of Possibility**

The chapter opens with a third-person descriptive portrait of Aurige. If, prior to tackling the text, the reader imagines Aurige as the male hero of antiquity (an assumption confirmed by the inclusion of a fragment of the sculpture in the photomontage), she is soon disabused of this notion. To begin with, the portrait of Aurige is anything but heroic. Here is the first image of Aurige, the “portrait” drawn by the narrator of the chapter:

*Ferocity, lasciviousness, monstrous egotism … there are plenty of inconsistent circumstances and details; it could be toned down … but what for? We should learn to select only what is essential …*
Redundant breasts; irregular, ineffectual teeth; eyes and hair of the blandest color; hands delicate enough but twisted, deformed. The oval head of a slave; forehead too high ... or too low; a nose fashioned well enough of its type—a hideous type; the mouth, too sensual: pleasing when you’re hungry, but once you’ve eaten it makes you want to vomit; the chin hardly juts out at all; and the body-wide muscles barely sketched.

This strange figure bears little resemblance to the charioteer of antiquity, and at this point one cannot tell whether we are talking about a man or a woman. Whenever an attribute connected to gender is described, its normal status is confounded. What might be potentially attractive feminine attributes are stripped of their gendered associations—breasts are “unnecessary,” the “delicate” hands are “twisted and deformed.” Likewise, what might be attractive male characteristics—a heroic forehead or aquiline nose—fail to accord with common ideals. The narrator’s comment toward the bottom of the first paragraph, “we should learn to select only what is essential,” is clearly ironic. It refers the reader back to the processes of idealization that were critiqued in the previous chapter of Disavowals. As the description continues, it is clear that nothing has been “toned down” to create an ideal image as a portraitist might do in order to flatter his sitter. According to this initial description, Aurige appears androgynous and monstrous but is presumed to be male like the charioteer of antiquity.

At this point the text takes a surprising turn. It continues:

Triumphant woman! ... sometimes triumphant in the face of the most appalling embarrassments, a last-minute dexterity corrects a shadow, an imprudent gesture—and beauty is reborn.

For in front of her mirror, Aurige is touched by grace. She consents to recognize herself. And the illusion that she creates for herself spreads itself to a few others.

This paragraph introduces both a shift in our perception of the main character’s gender and a shift in tone. Having been given a repellant description of Aurige, we see her transformed. All of this happens when she looks into the mirror.

This image of the woman before the mirror resonates with contemporary associations between femininity and narcissism and with the discussion of the Narcissus myth from chapter II of Disavowals. Central to many of these ideas about narcissism is the concept of idealization. For, as we saw in chapter II, the mirror into which Narcissus looks always presents an idealized vision, a vision that is, in practice, unobtainable. The mirror entices the self to self-reflection, and self-comparison to the idealized images that inhere in it. Cahun writes about the ubiquity of this urge to idealization: “The myth of Narcissus is everywhere. It haunts us. It has inspired the perfecting of life since that fatal day when the image was captured on the wave without ripples.” This desire to “perfect life” according to an external image on a mirroring surface is “fatal,” it “haunts us.” This aim of perfection began, she says, “when the image was captured on the wave without ripples.” The phrase “wave without ripples” signals the impossibility of the ideal. It is a paradox—for what is a wave but a big ripple? The ideal image depends on an artifice, on a stilling, that has little to do with the messy materiality of a life. The ideal doesn’t exist. Narcissus is bound to fail in the attempt to adequately see, know or possess this image. He is bothered not so much by the image itself as by his own inabilities—by “the insufficiency, the
discontinuity of his own gaze.” What Narcissus sees in the world can never match what he thinks should be presented in the still, perfect reflection—what Cahun calls Narcissus’ “mirage.”

Cahun uses the myth of Narcissus to highlight the power of ideal images to instill in subjects either a mirage of self-deception or a sense of their own failure or insufficiency. While the texts and images of chapter II of *Disavowals* explored alternative visions of Narcissus imagining an intersubjective “neo-narcissism,” chapters IV and V focus instead on the ways that cultural ideals of femininity constrain women’s desire. The images and texts of these chapters encourage reader to think differently about relationships of self and image, femininity, sexuality and love. Indeed, the images and texts of *Disavowals* demonstrate a keen interest in the ways the myth of Narcissus was being used in psychology, sexology and popular culture to demonize those who appeared to be either too caught up in their own self-admiration or straying too far from cultural ideals—people like Cahun and Moore themselves. Cahun’s insistence on the centrality of the mirror, be it literal or metaphorical, in the assumption of self has parallels with the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. Lacan would also describe the mirror image in relation to the development of subjectivity decades later in his discussions of the Mirror Phase.13 Elizabeth Grosz usefully summarizes the main points of Lacan’s theory:

The child sees itself as a unified totality, a *gestalt* in the mirror: it experiences itself in a schism, as a site of fragmentation. The child’s identification with its specular image impels it nostalgically to seek out a past symbiotic completeness, even if such a state never existed ... and to seek an anticipatory or desired (ideal or future) identity in the coherence of the totalized specular image. Lacan claims that the child is now enmeshed in a system of confused recognition/misrecognition ... It is the dual, ambivalent relation to its own image that is central to Lacan’s account of subjectivity ... Lacan posits a divided, vacillating attitude that is incapable of final resolution. This “divided” notion of the self and the problem of self-recognition are crucial in so far as they may explain processes of social inculcation and positioning.14

The parallels between Cahun’s literary description of Narcissus and Lacan’s psychoanalytic description of the human subject are many. Lacan describes the development from childhood, a development facilitated by the mirror, of a desire to seek out an “ideal ... identity in the coherence of the totalized specular image” that enmeshes the subject in a state of recognition and misrecognition. Similarly Cahun writes about Narcissus “falling” for his own image and loving his “mirage” and alternately by the “insufficiency” of his gaze. Perhaps most interesting for our purposes, both Lacan and Cahun see the idealization inculcated by the mirror as helping to explain “processes of social inculcation.” The constant striving for the ideal is at the heart of socialization according to contemporary conventions.

Cahun wrote the text of *Disavowals* several years before Jacques Lacan joined the Psychoanalytic Society of Paris, and approximately a decade before he first delivered his first paper on the “Mirror Phase.” Lacan did not publish his revised version of the essay in the *Revue française de psychanalyse* until 1949. Yet, significantly, Cahun and Lacan occupied the same cultural milieu. Both were well aware of Freud’s theories of narcissism as integral to female sexuality and central to male homosexuality, and drew on them while rejecting many of the normalizing aspects of them.15 Both were interested in Surrealism and its
Symbolist origins. Cahun and Lacan would eventually meet in the 1930s, after the publication of Disavowals.

Yet Cahun’s aim is quite different from Lacan’s. From the start, Cahun’s mission is to imagine how one might think otherwise about the relation between self and image, shifting constraint and inadequacy into self-acceptance and possibility. Lacan, on the other hand, saw no way out of the mirror and its reflections. His was a description of what he saw to be the human condition and a tool for the diagnosis of psychological abnormalities, but never, like Cahun’s, the starting point for a revolutionary revision in the way one ought to conceive the human subject.16

In contrast to the Narcissus of myth, and the narcissism of psychoanalysis, Aurige’s encounter with her image in the mirror is marked neither by delusional self-love nor by misrecognition and a desire for ideality, but by “grace” and self-acceptance. This figure not only controls her image, creates her own, unconventional idea of beauty, but is able to make others recognize its legitimacy as well: “For in front of her mirror, Aurige is touched by grace. She consents to recognize herself. And the illusion that she creates for herself spreads itself to a few others.”17 Cahun seems to be proposing a model of self that goes beyond the idea present in the Narcissus myth that one can know the self only at second hand, through reflections sent by others. Recall that Aurige is initially described in a “portrait,” which is, by definition, a view from the outside, an image of a self that is made by another. In this portrait, Aurige is described as “monstrous” and “hideous.” However, when Aurige looks into the mirror, she is “touched by grace” and “beauty is reborn.” If Aurige is “touched by grace,” we might imagine her transformation to be a product of an external force, such as the grace of God. However, what initially appears to be an outside influence from some higher power turns out to be a power from within Aurige herself: “She consents to recognize herself. And the illusion that she creates for herself spreads itself to others.” Aurige changes her self-perception not by the grace of God or any other agent, but by her own grace, and in doing so—in recognizing her image, “monstrous” and “hideous” though it may appear by conventional standards—as beautiful, Aurige makes it possible for this new perception of herself to spread to others. Her image as beautiful, created from within, soon becomes a reality. The new form of narcissism Aurige practices here is not merely a form of self-absorption. It is an active means of rejecting the idealized images out of which the self is formed and of presenting, also, a self that is not fixed.

Cahun had been thinking about this unfixing of ideals for years before the publication of Disavowals. The text of “Aurige” is, in fact, a revision of an essay written in the early 1920s titled “The Androgyne, heroine of all the heroines,” which she had originally envisioned as a part of the “Heroines” series she published in the Mercure de France and the Journal littéraire in 1925.18 While Cahun ultimately did not publish “l’Androgyne” with her other “Heroines” essays, she eventually rewrote it and included it in Disavowals under the title “Aurige.” The text about Aurige’s gaze into the mirror was included in the first essay. But instead of naming the character who gazes into the mirror “Aurige,” Cahun had originally named it “Narcissus.” Further, she employed male pronouns in relation to Narcissus rather than the female pronouns she would later use with Aurige: “For in front of his mirror, Narcissus is touched by grace. He consents to recognize
himself. And the illusion that he creates for himself spreads itself to others.” It is not Aurige, but Narcissus, who looks in the mirror. The pronouns Cahun uses here are masculine. However, the title, “Androgyne,” suggests that Narcissus is not a man but an “androgyne” and that androgyny is one of the characteristics that makes Narcissus the “heroine of all heroines.”

In “Aurige,” Cahun replaces Narcissus, a male figure popularly imagined to have feminine characteristics, with a male name derived from a young male hero of antiquity: Aurige. But the character’s attributes are feminine. Clearly, in both essays, Cahun means to confuse attributions of gender and to unmoor the readers’ assumptions. Most important for our purposes is the fact that there must have been something at stake for Cahun in turning the androgynous male character of Narcissus into the (arguably equally androgynous) female character Aurige. Cahun was interested not only in rejecting traditional ideas of gender and sexuality but also in emphasizing the effect that these have on women. The shift to Aurige, the woman, allows her to address how idealized images of femininity constrain women.

At the moment when “beauty is reborn,” the character of Aurige demonstrates a profound shift—a shift from letting herself be determined by external images to choosing her own definition of self and seeing all definitions of subjectivity as, in some sense, illusion. Here Cahun recognizes the central role played by visual imagery, especially self-reflection, in the formation of human subjectivity. It would not be wrong to say that the figure of “Aurige” is, in some ways, Cahun’s self-portrait. However, we should also remember that in the context of the 1920s there were extraordinary pressures on women to conform to particular images and gender roles. The aftermath of the First World War, depopulation fears and a government pronatalist campaign urged women to aspire toward an ideal of femininity that included resignation, motherhood, hearth and home. And yet, in the face of this, countless women chose otherwise—whether by cropping their hair and embracing modern body-liberating fashions, by pursuing careers, or, like the women of the Left Bank, by retreating to their own separatist artistic and literary communities. These women “consent[ed] to recognize” themselves outside the traditional definitions of femininity, and the “illusions” they created for themselves became realities as soon as they were recognized by others. Cahun composed “Aurige” not merely as an exploration of her own subjectivity; she also wanted it to stand more generally for her conception of how a woman might reconfigure narcissism and subjectivity.19

Psychological Portraits, Self-pride, and the Philosopher’s Stone of Love

Aurige’s capacity to look at herself in positive terms transforms her in the eyes of others as well. The chapter as a whole tells the story of a love triangle between three characters: “Aurige,” “The Poet” and “The Proprietor/Master.” As the text unfolds, the poet and the proprietor both pursue Aurige. All of the characters are defined, along with Aurige, as part of a “triptych” in the section titled
“Psychological Portraits.” "Psychological Portraits" describes the characteristics of Aurige, her "Proprietor" or "Master" (a figure for a husband or perhaps an embodiment of the Law of the Father) and “the Poet,” her lover. Knowing that any description will be inadequate, the narrator agrees to “say some inaccurate and provisional words” about Aurige and her admirers. However, before doing so, the narrator sets out the framework s/he will use, imagining the three characters in the drama adding up to a general paradigm for human nature:

Supposing that man's nature is to allow his life to be governed by: fear, the sexual instinct, vanity, greed, compulsive lying, self idolatry, pride—and all the nuances of these seven virtues—I will content myself with noting that Aurige represents here self-love, her master fear and pride, and her lover, daily vanity. Of course, at the beginning of the crisis all three must be sacrificed to the sexual instinct. But quickly their familiar demons will regain the upper hand.20

In this summary, we hear strong echoes of the Table of Contents of Disavowals (see Figure 0.2). In the table each chapter (except chapter II) is given a title composed of an acronym modified by a characteristic designated in English: "(fear), (self-love), (sex), (vanity, sex), (sex), (lying), (fear), (greed, fear, self-pride), (self-pride)." The terms evoked in this framework are highly significant, for they reiterate the framing device of the book as a whole. Putting this description together with the Table of Contents, it becomes clear once again that in Disavowals Cahun is not only giving a cancelled confession but grappling with what she sees as the human predicament. It is also noteworthy that the narrator describes these characteristics of fear, sex, vanity and so on as “seven virtues” rather than sins. Of course, Cahun is here evoking the Catholic notion of the seven deadly sins, many of which are part of the list of human characteristics discussed here. Notably, Aurige is associated with “self-love,” and this reiterates Cahun’s substitution of Narcissus for this character. Interestingly, too, this chapter is titled “C. M. C. (vanity, sex).” As we have already seen, Cahun liked to pun on the acronyms that opened her chapters. In this case, saying the letters C. M. C. in English renders the sounds “see em see” or “see 'em see.” In the chapter, we “see them see” vanity and sex as we watch Aurige gaze into her mirror and as we watch the love triangle between Aurige, the priorietor and the poet. C. M. C. also evokes the names “Cahun, Moore, Cahun.” Thus we might also interpret the title as alluding to Cahun’s and Moore’s own attempts via the characters represented to grapple with the dilemmas of subjectivity and desire.

Indeed, the narrator of the “Psychological Portraits” prefaces the text by denying that accurate portraits can be delineated. The language used evokes parallels to Cahun’s and Moore’s uses of photography and photomontage: “Sometimes chance hands us a little swatch of the soul. We put it away in a drawer. It will soon be impossible to match it with the piece of fabric it originally came from, which has become a dress or a curtain, faded, washed, often dyed.”21 This interesting passage defines the self as something constantly changing. A picture of a “swatch of the soul” can no longer be matched to the self from which it was drawn, for, over time, the original fabric of the soul has changed. At the same time, this passage about the mismatching of little pieces of the soul can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the relationships between photography, photomontage and the self. We might imagine the “swatch of the soul” as a
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photograph, handed to us by “chance” with the click of the camera’s shutter. Put away in a drawer and pulled out again later, that frozen image no longer presents a recognizable image of ourselves. Recall that the photomontages of Disavowals include many photographs of Cahun taken from childhood on, photographs we that can imagine had been collected in drawers, taken out later, and then pieced together—none of them any longer straightforwardly representing “the fabric” (or soul) they “originally came from,” which has now become something else. On one level, the photomontages are the new fabric made out of these fragments. They are images of the self (or soul—to take up the metaphorics of the text) as nothing but an assemblage of fragments, far from the unified ideal.

When the reader is finally given portraits of the three main characters, they are evoked in outline:

A: Aurige
principal traits: weakness and egoism.
proclaimed ideals: power in all its forms, the will to change, to remake oneself.
B: Aurige’s proprietor (owner, master)
principal trait: reserve
secret ideal: dignity
C: the poet, Aurige’s lover
principal traits: the need to meddle in everything, an inconsistent and wasted energy
proclaimed ideal: renunciation.22

Having done so, however, the narrator takes another tack: “This is far too cursory. I’ll never define them as well as they will define themselves. I am going to ask them questions and write down their replies. That will be better; one can be sure they will betray themselves whatever they say.”23 What follows is several pages of interviews in which a question is asked of all three. (“What would you like to be?” “What would you like to do?” “What would you like to know?” “What are your most obvious traits?” “What are your least obvious traits? “What do you like about yourself?” “What do you like least about yourself?” “What displeases you in general?” “What pleases you?” “What do you hope for?” “What do you fear?” “Happiest moments of your life?” “Saddest?” “Why are you afraid to die suddenly at this very moment?” “Why do you prefer yourself to everyone else?”) The answers are listed following the designations A, B and C.24

This method of soliciting questions has interesting intersections with a number of contemporary practices. On the one hand, the question mode or “enquête,” in which a range of respondents was asked the same question and their answers published together, had become a regular feature in literary and political journals of the 1920s and 1930s, both mainstream and avant-garde. It was a format favored by the Surrealists. Cahun participated in several such enquêtes in journals such as the homophile literary journal l’Amitié in 1925, the Surrealist Minotaur in 1933, and the left-leaning Commune in 1933.25 But this questioning format is here put to the task of revealing characteristics of personality, of drawing “portraits” of the characters described. Thus, the question-and-answer format has a slightly different valence here. With only three participants and multiple questions to each about him/herself, we are able to compare the answers in an attempt to discern the personality traits of each. Now the portraitist, who was attempting to provide a summary image of each member of Aurige’s entourage,
has been transformed into something like a psychoanalyst. And so too has the reader. A drama unfolds in the chapter between the lines of the answers given by these three characters. Thus, rather than reading a straightforward narrative with a recognizable set of characters and a clear plot, the reader is turned into an analyst. The responses the characters give to the narrator’s questions will not give any clear answers. They might, perhaps, offer coded messages whose decipherment will give us a better understanding of each character.

After this series of interviews, the reader is offered a collection of letters between Aurige and the Poet through which the drama of a love triangle between Aurige, the Master and the Poet unfolds—first, “Letters from Aurige to the Poet” and then “From the Poet to Aurige.” Rather than seeing the letters in chronological order, the reader is given fragments from Aurige’s letters, followed by fragments from the Poet to Aurige. The reader is thus invited to decipher, from the evidence of partial and mixed-up letters, what transpired between Aurige and the Poet. When the story was originally told in the essay “The Androgyne,” the letters from Aurige were divided into sections: “Preliminaries,” “High Point,” “Crisis (Breaking of sensual/carnal bonds),” “Decline,” “New Crisis (Breaking of intellectual bonds).” These section markers, which create a discernible plot, are, tellingly, left out of Disavowals, and the reader is left to her own interpretive devices. The section of text in which the letters are reproduced has as an epigraph: “Dead letter: you shall not take the name of love in vain.”

If the reader looks back to the photomontage while reading about Aurige and her predicaments, she will immediately see further connections between the photomontage and the text. In the bottom-left corner of the montage, a scientific chart graphs out some kind of relationship (Figure 4.3). The title of the chart reads “A.B.C,” and the letters seem intended to correspond to the reader/analyst’s findings. At the bottom of the photomontage Cahun and Moore include a fragment of a French postal dead-letter form—“Lettre tombée en rebut.” By this point, the “dead-letter” form and the stamps included in the photomontage adjacent to the scientific chart begin to make a kind of sense. They are connected to the story of Aurige that the reader has been trying to interpret in the text.

What is clear from the start, however, is that the reader/viewer will find no easy way to interpret the interviews and letters or their visual manifestations—the fragmentary chart and the dead-letter form. The chart refers to A, B and C; it is impossible to know on the evidence of what is included which line of the graph corresponds to which participant or what the lines might mean. Thus, at the same time as they introduce the scientific chart into the photomontage, Cahun and Moore nullify its function. No longer can it reflect any kind of fixed truth about the subjects it describes. The chart’s failure to reveal any truths is further
emphasized by the punning correspondence between the letters A, B and C and the dead-letter form with its heading “lettres tombées en rebut.” This form was used by the French postal service to record letters that could not be delivered to their addressed recipient. Like the postal letters recorded on such forms, the alphabetical letters A, B and C of the chart will never have a chance to communicate. Whereas the chart demonstrates the fruitlessness of reducing complexities of the self and relationships to others to numeric clinical mappings or administrative records, the form is a record of a letter that never reached its destination, a failed communication reduced to an administrative record. When seen together with the text of “psychological portraits,” the form and chart in the lower left call into question the results of psychoanalytic interpretive strategies. Attempting to pin down a diagnosis and communicate it to others in a rational scientific chart is a futile endeavor. The reader’s response to this imagery, the sense of frustrated communication and failed scientific delineation, resonates with the sense of being entrapped and closed off from sensual contact with others expressed in the rest of the photomontage. By including these elements alongside the imagery of Cahun with the cactuses and gloves, Cahun and Moore set up a tension between the idea of evidence and its records (the chart and form) and mystery or allusion (the cactuses and gloves). At the same time they reference the human capacity to attune to or turn away from external stimuli by contrasting an image of Cahun that engages with the world (floating in the mitten [Figure 4.4]) with one shut off from it (the cellophane Cahun [Figure 4.5]).

In the chart, Cahun imitates the scientific paradigm in order to subvert it. Cahun closely followed Surrealist journals, including La Rédution Surrealiste, whose format was loosely based on the format of the La Nature, “a periodical of science and its application to art and industry,” but the content of the Surrealist journal focused not on science but on dreams and other manifestations of the unconscious that might help bring about a Surrealist revolution. André Breton and his Surrealist group established the Bureau for Surrealist Research and invited the public to participate in their “researches,” which ultimately included an “enquête” on sexuality. However, rather than rational empirical science or the new science of psychology, their aim was neither to uncover the empirical truths about nature...
nor to cure their subjects. Instead, they sought to highlight the irrational aspects of nature and the human subject, and to undermine the modes of thought passed down since the Enlightenment. In this sense, Cahun’s use of the analytic paradigm is somewhat analogous to the Surrealist interest in psychoanalysis, for, like the Surrealists, she is not interested in using psychology to pursue a cure or reinforce ideas of normalcy. Her aim, like theirs, is quite the contrary.

And yet, as a reader, one tries to interpret the responses given by A, B and C to their interviews. And some conclusions can be drawn, especially from the text. Aurige’s Proprietor is a model of the conventional man. His characteristics include “My sense of responsibility” and “disdain for anything that is loud (in color), rowdy, or in bad taste. Constant fear of overestimating myself. A true fear of people’s opinions, even those I hate the most—at least of their lack of approval showing itself.” He worries about the opinions of others and demonstrates an “indifference to my own desires as soon any obstacles are put in my way.” He has fully assimilated social conventions and expectations. His “goddess” is “Reason,” and he sees this as his “secret superiority.” He has a taste for “logic” and a horror of anything “ridiculous.” He is most displeased by “Vulgarity, folly, mental weakness, ugliness, lack of self-control.” He expects “nothing from the future. Nothing except ordinariness.”

The Poet, on the other hand, is, like Aurige, outside the normative paradigm. He seems almost a caricature of the late Symbolist poet. He is interested in exoticism, esotericism. He wants to be “Buddha, a well-known dramatist, some great poet like Swinburne or Baudelaire, an asphodel or any other flower, for they are all beautiful ... an oriental queen, depraved and refined whom none can resist and who only harbors scorn for all her suitors.” He is flamboyant, desires fame, and already has a high opinion of himself. When asked what he wants to do, his answers vary from “Write beautiful dramatic comedies,” and “launch the most famous film stars, direct X’s play ... which all of Paris will go to see ... etc.” to “live in the calm of the fields or the beauty of a sumptuous palace, served by a thousand slaves ....” Indeed, in this caricature of a Symbolist we also see a re-creation of the negative view of a homosexual man.

In contrast to these two, Aurige is above all a mass of contradictions who fails to fit conventional female types. When asked about her dominant characteristics, she describes herself thus:

"The dominance of my body over my will to power, the tyrannies of its weaknesses. The inability to comprehend objective realities, to adapt myself to the incessant changes of life ... Pride in everything I’d like to be, in my superlative self. Systematic depreciation of all realities, starting with my own. Timidity coming from self-consciousness. Superstitions, but not traditional ones. I only believe in the monsters I’ve created myself, I will only believe in the Messiah who will descend for me in me, made to measure and without equal. Difficulty imagining anything concrete, proper names, for example. Love of abstraction, of symbols."

Her self-descriptions will remind the reader not of social types with which they are familiar, but instead of other confessional texts in Disavowals. Recalling Cahun’s title of chapter II, “I. O. U. Self-Pride,” Aurige speaks of her “pride in everything I’d like to be, in my superlative self.” Her claim that “I will only believe in the Messiah who will descend for me in me, made to measure and without
“equal” recalls the formula from chapter II: “I am, the I is God \{×\} God/God.” Yet she also describes “the dominance of my body over my will to power. The tyranny of its weaknesses.” While she may have “difficulty imagining anything concrete,” she sees her embodiedness as an important part of herself. And we should recall the kind of body she is described to have: of uncertain gender, far from ideal in form, full of desire. Such embodiedness is exactly what is erased in the mirrored reflection in which the body is transformed from a material thing into an image. Aurige thus offers an alternative to traditional conceptions of femininity.

When asked what she likes most about herself, Aurige gives answers that emphasize alternatives to traditional morality that derive from a “childlike” nature: “My insatiable astonishment at life. My childlike questions. The sympathy I feel at the first glance (as short as that lasts), at the first word, for everyone. My refusal to judge anything without taking everything into consideration. My moral indecisiveness. My scrupulous and scandalous sincerity. My need for perfection.”31 Aurige appears here as a figure who is unaffected by traditional bourgeois morality, for whom the process of socialization has failed. This unsocialized or not yet socialized being was described at approximately this time by Breton and his ilk as the perfect Surrealist subject. For Freud, narcissism is a lack of socialization in which the subject has failed to redirect his or her libidinal energies away from him or herself and toward an ego-ideal conditioned by social conventions determined by family, culture or nation.32 The narcissist is, in some sense, stuck in a childlike state. However, the more we read about Aurige, the more we have the sense that hers is an active refusal of socialization rather than a naturally occurring childlike state such as the one the Surrealists prized in children, the mad or the femme enfant.

This refusal to conform is enabled by conscious self-fashioning—a point emphasized when Aurige describes what “displeases [her] most in general.” Aurige says: “Being caught off guard … replying without preparation, writing with no crossings-out, showing myself without makeup, even if the makeup makes me have an ugly hue, suffering from badly strung nerves. That was the reply my body gave.”33 This emphasis on the need for self-fashioning—the need for preparation, makeup, editing one’s writing, suggests a desire to control one’s image. But always, there is an acknowledgment of the body itself as the source of that image. Later, when she is asked about the happiest moments of her life, she says: “Dreaming. Imagining that I am another. Playing my preferred role.”34 Here is a woman who fashions herself according to her own rules and rejects convention. Indeed, when she describes what displeases her most about others, she says: “From the perspective of my sensibility, I will answer: human beings. Everything in them that appears to me to be superficial, conventional, unjust, greedy, irrational, second-hand. Human cruelty.”35 Aurige rejects the rules of normative culture and attempts to fashion a self that does not correspond to accepted ideals. Yet she also accepts the self she creates. Her interlocutor asks, “Why do you prefer yourself to all others?” and she responds:

> Because this person is the only one I can use to prefer everyone else. Because she is the closest to me, the tool I have at hand. Because I feel, because I am, because I cannot do otherwise.36

Thus ends the interview.
The figure of Aurige is clearly a portrait of the self toward which Cahun aspires. But it is also an alternative model of femininity. For, as we shall see, Aurige stands in great contrast to Mlle X, whose portrait we are given in the next chapter of *Disavowals*. Mlle X remains imprisoned, wearing a mask that conforms to social expectations of femininity, and longs to escape. Aurige creates her own identity. Her mask is her own, and she loves it even if others consider it ugly. In addition, in her explanation of why she prefers herself to all others, there is an implicit acceptance of the body in all its materiality, replete with desire. “This person,” says Aurige, “is the only one I can use to prefer everyone else.” She prefers herself because having a self allows her to prefer—to make distinctions, to feel pleasure at one thing more than another. Here we begin to see that the self she describes is not the disembodied image in the mirror, but the embodied self: “she is the closest to me, the tool I have at hand.” Loving the self means loving not just the image but the feelings as well, and accepting what one has at hand: “Because I feel, because I am, because I cannot do otherwise.” This kind of “self-pride” enables a reversal of the normal trajectory of idealization in which the body in its materiality and feeling is forsaken for an image. In contrast to this, when writing to the Poet in the letter fragments, Aurige describes a movement from the merest conventional sign to the embodiment of sensual pleasures:

> I have found in my self-pride the philosopher’s stone of love. With it, I can accomplish the transmutation of joys: from signs, I’ll make sounds; from sounds, I’ll make scents, from scents, I’ll make kisses; from kisses, I’ll obtain caresses …

The philosopher’s stone was the imagined alchemical key that transformed base metals into gold—a process imagined as purification. The philosopher’s stone is thus an emblem of idealization intended to eliminate base materials. Yet here Cahun uses the “philosopher’s stone of love” to go in the other direction, from the immaterial, uncorrupted sign to the material, sensuous and corporeal. She will “transmute joys,” making them derive not from the image or sign, but from the body itself: “from signs I’ll make sounds; from sounds, I’ll make scents, from scents, I’ll make kisses; from kisses, I’ll obtain caresses.” The ultimate end, then, is carnal rather than ideal, and sensual—even sexual. And Aurige, using the philosopher’s stone of love, her “self-pride” controls them all. She “accomplish[es] the transmutation of joys.” Through the figure of Aurige, Cahun imagines an alternative universe in which subjectivity is not constrained and structured in advance by conventional images—a universe in which bodies—even those that do not follow conventional morality—are inhabited from a position of joy, sensuality and love rather than one of shame—a universe in which women can “exist otherwise.”

**Portraits of Femininity**

Chapter V of *Disavowals* also opens with a portrait. The first lines of the chapter read: “Portrait of Mademoiselle X (photo if possible).” If Aurige, whose portrait we saw in the previous chapter, was an exceptional, indefinable woman, the subject of this chapter is an anonymous young everywoman. Identified only
as “Mlle X,” the woman described here should be seen as Cahun’s portrait of femininity. Cahun uses her image in order to deconstruct and mock the role young women are expected to play. Whereas in her evocation of Aurige, Cahun proposed a model for emulation, in the portrait of Mlle X, she shows us her view of the truth about conventional femininity: it is a trap, an enticement into a hell of conventionality, an empty façade. Here is the description that opens the chapter:

Some strands of barbed wire. A solid gate firmly locked. The chain: a chastity belt. Rusted padlock; security wax melted into the lock. A powerful guard dog with seven flaming mouths, so well trained that it will savage something to death rather than bark. Don’t wake the neighbor’s cat!

A wasteland. At the bottom, three gates.

The narrowest one, the gate to paradise and written there: Verboten toegang.

Medium-sized, with a well-worn doorstep, the entrance to purgatory. There is a sign here too: No thoroughfare.

In the middle, the widest gate, the one to hell. The sign here declares categorically: Leave all hope behind, indiscreet ones! This threshold is impassable.

Behind the metal hedge, a smiling woman—open-faced, expressing nothing but trust, courtesy, the most agreeable politeness—gestures to passers-by: please come in! …

If you dared look at it up close, this face would be nothing more than a mask; the body made of straw to the specifications of the most common taste and changing whenever it wishes; the naked hands, gloves the color of skin, on which (as evidence of prudence) the cuffs form extra mittens …

But where has the hostess taken refuge?—There, behind the spy hatch, holes for pupils, two black dots of mistrust (mathematical dots) are on sentry duty, perpetually on the defensive.

And right at the back of the gap that’s there for breathing, despite the soul on patrol, the treacherous pink flash of a gnawed tongue flickers back and forth.38

Mlle X is imprisoned behind “barbed wire,” “a solid gate firmly locked,” with “the chain: a chastity belt” and a “rusted padlock: security wax melted into the lock.” The likening of the chain that holds the gate in place to a chastity belt alludes to the idea that Mlle X is being locked up for her own protection, in particular to protect her from things sexual—to forcibly maintain her propriety. Naming her “Mlle X” reinforces this idea: this alias was used in medical studies, pornography and elsewhere to maintain the anonymity of the subject and thus protect her from disgrace. Immediately the description of the imprisonment of Mlle X calls to mind the image of Cahun behind bars at the bottom of the photomontage that opens this chapter (Figure 4.6). Cahun peers at us from behind a grid of bars and, adjacent to her mouth, a heart-shaped padlock leans in toward her face. In the lower-left corner, a petal shape contains the image of a mouth. The mouth, orifice of pleasure and speech, with its lips relaxed and slightly open, and the hint of a smile, contrasts greatly with the padlocked mouth of Cahun behind bars. In the image of Cahun, the lock next to the mouth seems to suggest the silencing—of voice and of sensuality.
4.6 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Faceplate for Chapter V entitled M. R. M. in Aveux non avenus, 1930.
The imagery of the mouth is carried further in the description of Mlle X's captivity that follows. In addition to being imprisoned and locked up in a chastity belt, she is guarded by a “powerful guard-dog with seven flaming mouths.” In the portrayal of the dog, a witty undercurrent begins to build as Cahun mocks social expectations by stating that the dog is “so well trained that it will maul something to death rather than bark. Don’t wake the neighbor’s cat!”

Whoever has trained this dog seems to have the wrong priorities. To avoid “wak[ing] the neighbor’s cat”—to make a fuss, to disturb the peace with its voice—the dog has been trained to kill violently, without warning, rather than bark. In addition to mocking the social comportment of the dog trainer, Cahun’s reference to the dog with seven mouths re-creates the mythical three-headed dog Cerberus that, in Greek mythology, guarded the entrance to Hades. And it is probably no accident that this dog has seven mouths, one for each of the deadly sins (or “virtues” as they were called in the previous chapter). For Cahun goes on to describe a crossroads with three gates: the gate to paradise, the entrance to purgatory, and the gate to hell. Each, in a different language, refuses admittance. “Verboten toegang,” says the narrowest of the three—the gate to paradise; “No thoroughfare” (in English), says the medium-sized door, the entrance to purgatory; and the widest gate, the gate to hell, says in French: “Quittez toute espérance, indiscrets! Ce seuil est infranchissable.”

In French, the word “indiscret” refers to one who speaks of things that they shouldn’t—tells a secret, gossips about someone else, or asks an inappropriate question. Even hell, it seems, will not admit such indiscretion. Apparently social mores reign there too. Indeed, it seems as though Cahun’s hell is peopled by those who adhere to such conventions.

The gate to hell is a “metal hedge” and, behind it, “a smiling woman,” presumably Mlle X, whose face “has only ever offered the expression of confidence, courtesy, the most amenable politeness.” She “signals to passersby: please come in!”

The woman behind the gate is the perfect picture of femininity. Yet she is also the hell’s doorkeeper, who with her perfect manners and politeness lures the unsuspecting into its depths. However, the façade is false, for, says Cahun, “if you dare to look at it closely, this face is only a mask; this body, a body of straw accommodating the general taste and changing when it feels like it; these naked hands, gloves the color of skin, and upon which (in order to be prudent) the sleeves have extra mittens ....” This woman who exhibits the picture of femininity is thus no more than an empty shell. The language used to describe her, particularly the “naked hands, gloves the color of skin” and the mittens that are evidence of prudence, recall the photomontage in the preceding chapter of *Disavowals* (see Figure 4.1). Furthermore, in the lower-right corner of the photomontage we see another pair of hands with a mitten-like shape atop them (Figure 4.7). The image is repeated in a slightly different form in the photomontage in chapter IV. Here we see the intertextuality of *Disavowals* once again. The meanings of
the photomontages and the many writings in each chapter build in a nonlinear way, and the reader finds her understanding of both text and image enhanced as she makes her way through the book. In this element of the photomontage an image of Cahun peers through a wooly surface. The hands are darker and are an inverted image of the perfect hands in the previous montage; Cahun’s face and the mitten appear to have been created through multiple exposures. One has the sense that in these two images of Cahun—one imprisoned by bars, the other peering through a wooly haze—we are faced with entrapment. Especially in the context of the description of Mlle X’s politeness and her difference from the *indiscrets*, these images seem to evoke the closing-off of speech, entrapment as the silencing of a forbidden secret.

As we continue with the text, we learn that behind the empty shell of the “smiling woman,” another woman is hiding: “behind peep-hole pupils, two black dots of mistrust (mathematical dots) are on sentry duty, perpetually on the defensive.”41 This woman, “the hostess,” has “taken refuge.” She has escaped from the façade of the smiling woman. Yet, even as she hides, we see a flicker of her—the “the treacherous pink flash of a bitten tongue moves back and forth.” This imagery of the tongue flicking back and forth is both erotic and frightening—like the tongue of a lover or the tongue of a snake. Significantly, the tongue is bitten. The woman has made an attempt to hold it, to restrain herself, even to the point of doing injury to her own body and voice. And yet she seems to have failed. For the tongue is not still, but “flicking back and forth.” In French, the expression “se mordre la langue” suggests that someone has said something they regretted. Thus the woman hiding behind the spy hatch, a woman who has bitten her tongue, is a woman who has failed to maintain the appropriate discretion, even injuring herself in the attempt to do so. She is an “indiscrète,” much like Aurige in the previous chapter.

The next short passage juxtaposes the reserve associated with polite social behavior against unreserved emotion and sets these in the context of femininity. It reads:

> Would you be afraid to show your teeth? To dare to laugh without restraint, to react to the point of tears? What good would it serve? Your calm will also betray you: the smile is the realm of women.42

The presumed “you” is clearly a woman, and a challenged is launched. Will she “dare to laugh without restraint, to the point of tears?” This kind of laughter is very different from the polite smile of the hostess whom we saw earlier in the text—the one who ushers passersby into hell. The unrestrained laughter is more akin to pure, unsocialized emotion—what Mlle X might have tried to prevent by biting her tongue. The question, “Are you afraid to show your teeth?” also resonates with the imagery of the seven-headed dog that mauls. Together with the laughter, the questions asked of the woman encourage her to imagine herself free of the social constraints of polite society. In the end, the questioner asks: “What good would it do? Your calm will also betray you: the smile is the realm of women.” This comment suggests that even were the woman in the text to have escaped her façade of femininity momentarily—to have laughed without restraint—she would eventually be forced back into its trap—back into the polite smile, back into women’s realm.
Yet this photomontage lacks any clear illustration of the woman described. Instead, images evoking sensuality and the voice are juxtaposed with others evoking entrapment. Along the bottom of the photomontage we see a series of elements. They describe a progression from the already familiar image of Cahun linked to the previous photomontage. First, Cahun’s face peers through the fuzzy mitten; next, the image of Cahun behind bars; further to the left, an unobstructed image of the top half of Cahun’s head, which seems to be rising up into the frame; and finally, the mouth in the lower-left corner. Thus, as the viewer’s eye moves from right to left, toward the lower-left corner, the imagery diverges from the entrapment represented in the text and toward another alternative. Cahun’s appearance does not adhere to contemporary standards of femininity—even those of modern women with short fashionable bobs. Her head, as it rises up from the bottom of the frame, is not closed off by bars or hidden behind a veil. And it sits adjacent to the mouth-petal, figure of sensuality and speech. The photomontage that accompanies the chapter seems to play with the overturning of sensual imprisonment and a move toward the other end of the sensual spectrum, answering what we have just begun to see is the challenge of the text: to reject social convention, to feel, to laugh unrestrainedly.

While the photomontage alludes in many places to the imprisonment of the senses, it is also replete with bodily imagery that links sensation and sexuality. We see repeated images of Cahun with her hands over her ears. They are derived from a photograph that was taken at the same time as the images of Cahun that make up the photomontage in discussed in Chapter 3 of this book (Figure 4.8). These alternate with a repeated image of Cahun with her eyes masked by superimposed exposures. Furthermore, the photomontage incorporates several pairs of lips. This seems to allude to “hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil” imagery. However, the lips play a double role. For though they have been cut out in petal shapes and arranged to create the shape of a flower with its petals being plucked, the center of the flower appears to be a photograph of an anus. The image suggests sodomy, recalling the discussions of homosexuality and “Sodom, City of Light” in chapter III of Disavowals. In addition, the juxtaposition of anus and mouth has affinities with the smashing of hierarchies expressed in Surrealism, not only the Surrealism of André Breton and his group, but also the dissident Surrealism of Georges Bataille and the Documents with their emphasis...
on the informe. The anus-flower mixes the innocent and the indecent with the allusion to a childlike game. For some of its petal-lips have been plucked, and fall toward the lower-left corner. The plucked petals of the flower remind us of the children’s game of “he loves me, he loves me not,” or, in French, “she loves me a little, a lot, passionately, madly, not at all.” Thus the imagery of the plucked flower evokes the child’s acquisition of adult desires and the inculcation into romance. However, with its explicit references to the mouth and the anus, the development of sexuality itself is also engaged. Given that the flower is made up of mouths and an anus, the innocence of the game is, to say the least, open to question and, with it, the innocence of childhood as well.

Like the Surrealists, Cahun took a great interest in the Marquis de Sade and Freud. The flower seems to allude to the kinds of perversions found in Sadean discourse as well as having affinities with Freud’s oral and anal stages of development. Throughout the 1920s, literary journals such as the Mercure de France (to which Cahun contributed), the Nouvelle Revue Française and Les Marges considered Freud’s theories. Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality was translated into French and widely published in Paris in 1923. It included not only a discussion of infantile sexuality, but opened with the essay “The Sexual Aberrations,” which attributed sexual aberrations, including homosexuality, to failed (or incomplete) socialization from the infantile stage to normative adult sexuality. In the essay “Infantile Sexuality,” Freud opens by noting that all of his colleagues have neglected child sexuality, suggesting instead that the sexual instinct develops only after childhood. He writes, “the reason for this strange neglect is to be sought, I think, partly in considerations of propriety, which the authors obey partly as a result of their own upbringing.” In claiming so directly that sexuality exists from infancy, Freud’s entire essay is “indiscreet.” It raises issues that propriety demands should not be talked about. We can see why this might have appealed to Cahun.

In discussing the pregenital phases of sexual organization, Freud describes first an “oral” and then an “anal” stage. Both of these come prior to initiation into socially acceptable adult sexuality. They are the realm in which, according to Freud, those with sexual aberrations remain at least partly stuck. Thus, according to Freud, someone like Cahun would be associated with this kind of infantile sexuality. It seems quite possible that Cahun had this essay in mind when she composed her anus-mouth flower. Significantly, in the “anal” stage, Freud explains, while there exist opposing currents of desire, “they cannot yet, however, be described as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, but only as ‘active’ and ‘passive’.” Activity is associated with an instinct for mastery and “the organ which represents the passive sexual aim” is the anus. Freud’s insistence on speaking the unspeakable about sexuality, combined with his theorization of a form of sexuality that is neither “masculine” nor “feminine,” would have had considerable appeal for Cahun. The association of this kind of infantile sexuality with the anus might help to explain the rather startling imagery of the anus-flower.

Indeed, the photomontage also references the active/passive dynamic. A handwritten quotation at the top left of the photomontage suggests a sadomasochistic reading: “Here the executioner (le bourreau) takes on the air of the victim. But you know what to believe.” This note is signed “claude.” Here
Claude Cahun overtly identifies herself, in a familiar form, with the images in the photomontage, as if interpreting them for the reader. But her interpretation is equivocal. It puns on the word “bourreau” (executioner) for its similarity to the French word for female donkey, bourrique, as well as the English “burro.” Immediately to the right of this handwritten text, an image of Cahun’s inverted head surrounded by arms loosely mimics the shape of a donkey’s head with its tall ears. If Cahun is the “burro,” she is also the “bourreau,” the executioner.51 But, as we have already seen, Cahun is also depicted at least once as the entrapped victim. In addition, the term bourreau was also used in the French idiom “bourreau des coeurs” (executioner of hearts) to signify a seducer or a Don Juan type. It is not clear in the text or in the images who is the executioner and who the victim: which Cahun has the upper hand? And what are we to make of the claim that the executioner only seems like the victim (“prend l’air de victime”)? The following phrase, “you know what to make of that,” suggests that the executioner, the one in control, is not really a victim at all. When Cahun writes, “here the executioner seems like the victim,” should we understand this as referring only to the “here” of the photomontage? Is Cahun only playing the victim to make a point? Claiming to retain her power? Or should we connect this claim also to the text? Mlle X would, of course, be both “executioner,” in the sense that she lures people to hell, and victim, in that she is trapped in her role. The handwriting on the photomontage is evocative, but, like the photomontage and published texts themselves, impossible to resolve.

Cahun uses the techniques of montage throughout Disavowals in both images and texts. She is clearly aware of Surrealist interests and techniques, employing them when they suit her needs. André Breton discusses both visual and textual montage in the “Surrealist Manifesto.” In addition to referencing “the pieces of paper that Picasso and Braque insert into their work” as legitimate works of art, Breton also claims: “It is even permissible to entitle poem what we get from the most random assemblage possible ... of headlines and scraps of headlines cut out of the newspapers.”52 Breton describes the juxtapositions of montage, be it literary or visual, as a prime Surrealist method. The “exquisite corpse,” is, perhaps, the most familiar surrealist montage—a form of drawing emulating a parlor game in which multiple participants contributed portions of text to a story without knowing what came previously. In this photomontage, Cahun offers a photographic parallel to the exquisite corpse. Along the right side of the photomontage, a series of photographs and graphic elements connect uncomfortably to one another in a manner that, like an “exquisite corpse” drawing, composes some kind of creature. At the top, a multiply exposed image including Cahun’s head, and a dramatic gesture of an adult in a black suit, reads as a strange hat; below it, the beribboned blank oval tied up with a heart-shaped bow makes a head; a graphically rendered black heart represents the torso. At the bottom, the hips and legs are composed of multiple exposures, this time also involving mirror symmetry. The imagery is hard to define, but we can clearly distinguish a child’s legs and the skirt of a dress or underdress. This skirt is exposed with a mirror and appears as a bow tied around the waist of this strange figure. In this confusing montage, imagery of childhood and dramatically coded adulthood overlap. We can never know whether multiple authors arranged these pieces. Indeed, the element of chance juxtaposition comes not from having different
authors, but from bringing together disparate elements through photography and drawing. What is most clearly emphasized is the difficulty with which the different elements are held together and the impossibility of reading this “body” as a whole. The figure is made up of artificial and packaged elements—the beribboned “head” and “waist”—which are superimposed with evocations of both childhood (the little girl’s legs at the bottom) and adulthood (the black-suited dramatic gesture at the top). This “exquisite corpse” brings childhood and adulthood together both in its imagery and in its evocation of an adult game, since play is associated with childlike pursuits.

There are other images of childhood in the photomontage. On the left side, adjacent to the anus-flower, we see a childhood photo of Cahun’s face. This is the same photo that was featured at the bottom center of the photomontage that opened chapter I of Disavowals, the chapter that played with the idea of romantic heterosexual love and its coercive effect on girlhood. The image of Cahun as a girl is surrounded by interlocking hands and arms. They describe a circle, or “O,” which we see throughout Disavowals as a figure for narcissistic self-absorption. Indeed, for Freud, the child is the prime narcissist. However, the normal adult will outgrow his narcissism. Because this childhood portrait of Cahun is adjacent to the anus-flower, the imagery of childhood is further linked with sexuality. Yet this is a kind of sexuality that is taboo, labeled by contemporary culture as a perversion.53 The photomontage thus depicts childhood in ways that link it both to sexuality and, in conjunction with the text, to social convention.

A Childlike World for the Rest of Us

But the green paradise ...

I was hoping that God would fashion, out of the leftovers of the universe, a childlike world just for the rest of us ... a world in which the forces of nature and elementary instincts, sadness, and indecent pleasure, and all emotions would be simple pretexts, decorative motives imitating the earth, the water, fire, flesh, and blood.54

In the pages that follow the “Portrait of Mlle X,” Cahun attempts to reimagine the world as “a childlike world just for the rest of us”—a world that does not require the suppression of “indecent pleasures” for the sake of social convention. For several pages, the writings of this chapter focus their attention on the child. In these pages, the child becomes a palimpsest in whose traces Cahun mines alternatives to conventional adulthood and traces the consequences of normative socialization. Cahun was not the only one to see childhood as a liberating arena, nor the first. Her interest in childhood had many reference points from the Symbolist, to the Surrealist, to the psychoanalytic (as we have just seen). From Baudelaire forward, many Symbolist poets imagined the child as having a privileged (because uncorrupted) sensibility. In “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863) for example, Baudelaire refers to genius as “nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will,” because the child “sees everything in a state of newness, he is always drunk” with amazement at the spectacle that unfolds
Building on the Symbolist idea of the child and drawing on Freud, in the “Manifesto of Surrealism,” André Breton wrote:

“From childhood memories, and from a few others, there emanates a sentiment of being unintegrated, and then later of having gone astray, which I hold to be the most fertile that exists. It is perhaps childhood that comes closest to one’s “real life”; ... childhood, where everything nevertheless conspires to bring about the effective, risk-free possession of oneself. Thanks to Surrealism, it seems that opportunity knocks a second time.”

Breton follows this description of childhood, and of Surrealism as a willful recovery of those qualities that allow one to come closer to the “real” truth of subjectivity, by a description of “a precious terror” in the shadows of the unconscious that ought to be liberated rather than kept hidden for the sake of propriety. Recall that just prior to the passage about the “childlike world” quoted above, the description of Mlle X asks, “Would you ... dare to laugh without restraint?” and that when asked what she likes about herself, the character Aurige says, “my infantile questioning.” In each case we see parallels with the Baudelairean description of the artist and the Surrealist recasting of Baudelaire’s veneration of the qualities of the child.

In the text that follows the “Portrait of Mlle X,” Cahun tries to imagine a utopian world before judgments. Her motivation for this is not hard to conceive. For she is clearly not the empty polite hostess who perfectly enacts conventional female roles. She is, rather, one of those whom Freud and others would describe as having failed in the acquisition of normal sexual desire and object choice. The epigraph to the chapter references this. It reads:

“I played with words, those colors without danger. Forgive me, but forgive me for something else. And it’s so serious, so total, that I hardly dare ... Everyday life, this abomination! I exist, and that permits everything. Forgive me for existing.”

In this epigraph Cahun admits to “play[ing] with words.” However, the epigraph also suggests that it is not the words found in Disavowals that will condemn her, but rather her very existence: “I exist, and that permits everything. Forgive me for existing.” This passage is reminiscent of André Gide’s account of his motivation for writing about homosexuality in Corydon: “what I have to say about such things does not bring them into existence. They exist. I am trying to explain what exists. And since in most cases no one is willing to admit that such things exist, I am examining, I am trying to examine, whether it is really as deplorable as it is said to be—that such things exist.”

Given Cahun’s interest in Corydon, and her explicit examination of homosexuality in chapter III of Disavowals, combined with the references to sexual development in the photomontage, it seems likely that when she asks, “forgive me for existing” she is referencing her own homosexual desire. Cahun’s epigraph and Gide’s passage imply that the subject under discussion is not to be talked about in polite company—it is “indiscreet.” However, both distinguish between writing about a thing and bringing it into existence. Gide notes that “what I have to say about such things does not bring them into existence.” Cahun initially asks for forgiveness for her word play but then notes that this is not really what she should be asking forgiveness for. Furthermore, whereas Gide asks “whether it is as deplorable as it is said to be
that such things exist,” Cahun writes about the threat she poses to conventional culture: “I exist, and that permits everything.” The implication here is that the very existence of her non-normative sexuality opens up a Pandora’s box of unspeakable desire.

Yet it is clear from the text of the chapter that Cahun wishes to imagine a world in which such desire would not be unspeakable, a world in which the speaker of the epigraph would not have to ask forgiveness for her very existence. Immediately following the portrait of Mlle X, the text shifts gear as she imagines alternative worlds:

But the green paradise ...

I was hoping that God would fashion, out of the leftovers of the universe, a childlike world just for the rest of us ... 

Cahun begins this meditation with the first half of a line from a poem by Charles Baudelaire. “Mais le vert paradis ...” is one of the repeated refrains from the poem “Moesta and Errabunda” (“Grieving and Wandering,” 1857). In this poem, two outcasts, the poet and a companion, imagine escape from modern life. Baudelaire’s poem begins by asking its interlocutor whether she would like to “escape the black ocean of the immense city/To another ocean where splendor shines forth.” Baudelaire then goes on to imagine an alternate world, using a refrain from which Cahun drew the first line of the passage quoted above. Baudelaire’s refrain reads in full:

Mais le vert paradis des amours enfantines,
L’innocent paradis, plein de plaisirs furtifs,
Est-il déjà plus loin que l’Inde et que la Chine?60
(“But the green paradise of childlike loves,
The innocent paradise, full of furtive pleasures,
Is it already as distant as India or China?”)

Thus, using a famous line from Baudelaire—one that her literary peers would likely have recognized—Cahun evokes a longing for a world where love can still be innocent, where “exotic” sexualities are not deemed corrupt. After opening her own text with this line from Baudelaire, Cahun then goes on to imagine her own version of the Baudelairean paradise. Cahun writes:

I was hoping that God would fashion, out of the leftovers of the universe, a childlike world just for the rest of us, a shiny, varnished toy of colors without danger, image expurgated of life for the use of the weak, the innocent, those discharged from duty due to spiritual deficiency, a world where the forces of nature and elementary instincts, sadness and indecent pleasure and all emotions would be simple pretexts, decorative motives imitating the earth, the water, fire, flesh, and blood.61

Significantly, we see a phrase from the epigraph, “colors without danger,” repeated here. In the epigraph, Cahun had written: “I played with words, those colors without danger. Forgive me, but forgive me for something else.” In the epigraph, Cahun describes her words as “colors without danger,” a phrase that is initially quite puzzling. But the attentive reader will remember the epigraph
when she reads the phrase “a childlike world for the rest of us, a shiny varnished toy of colors without danger.” This new world of “colors without danger” is made “for the use of the weak, the innocent, those discharged from duty due to spiritual deficiency.” The passage is difficult to understand, but it seems to evoke a world that gives comfort to “the rest of us,” the misfits. In addition, it is fashioned out of the rejected, “the leftovers of the universe.” It is a world that does not suppress the kind of feelings that, in Cahun’s world of France in the 1920s, would have been deemed indiscreet: “sadness and indecent pleasure and all emotions.” We can imagine that in this world Mlle X, with her flicking pink tongue, would feel comfortable, “laugh[ing] without restraint.” Here, she could “show her teeth” and “react to the point of tears.” She wouldn’t even need to “dare.” Like Aurige, who transmuted “signs” into “kisses,” Cahun imagines a sensual world, a “green paradise” occupied by the dispossessed and dismissed.

As the passage continues, Cahun describes the qualities that her perfect world should omit and thus, by implication, suggests, yet again, what she sees as the worst characteristics of the current world:

I was hoping that God would fashion, out of the leftovers of the universe, a childlike world especially for the rest of us … where longitudes and latitudes would no longer atrociously bruise the globe … where the untrussed chicken, the criminal’s wrist, the dog’s neck will no longer bear blue-edged, reddened hairless gashes … where the wasp, taking off its corset, will no longer rub its stripes, nor Saint X his stigmata … I was hoping … but God would not give way on this.

In the continuation of this passage, the description of the world Cahun wishes to escape is increasingly nightmarish, and increasingly Surrealistic. It is full of frightening images: the earth itself is bruised by the lines that encircle it like a trussed chicken, a criminal’s wrist, a dog’s neck, the wasp’s corseted thin middle—all damaged by “blue-edged, reddened hairless gashes.” Although seemingly disparate, this imagery references entrapment and recalls Mlle X’s chastity belt. And this entrapment is irreverently juxtaposed to a saint, Saint X, who suffers. Having just read about the predicament faced by Mlle X, the reader will have the sense that she, like them, is entrapped. This world, with its confinements—the world the narrator implies she currently inhabits—is a far cry from the world she hopes for, “green paradise” of Baudelaire’s or Cahun’s imaginings.

Childhood and the Age of Reason

Cahun’s evocation of a childlike world without social constraint seems indebted not only to Baudelaire but also to Freud. In 1924, known as the “Saison Freud” because Freud was so popular in intellectual circles, the literary and cultural journal _Le Disque Vert_ devoted a special issue to Freud titled “Freud et la psychanalyse.” Given that many of Cahun’s friends and acquaintances collaborated on this journal and, further, that Cahun herself contributed to _Le Disque Vert_ in 1925, we can be relatively certain that Cahun would have read this issue of the journal. She might have been particularly interested in an
article titled “Opinion of an outsider about Freud” that summarized Freud in five propositions, the first three of which read:

1. Sexual life is awakened from the birth. The pleasure an infant experiences when sucking is sexual. The little boy is obscurely in love with his mother, obscurely jealous of his father, and it is the inverse for the little girl. This *Oedipus Complex* nevertheless doesn’t prevent the children of both sexes from being more or less homosexual, sadistic, masochistic, coprophilic and, in a word, polymorphous perverse.

2. With what we call “the age of reason,” assisted by education and moral and social influences, the child represses his incestuous or perverse desires, which subsist, *forgotten*, in the unconscious.

3. If sexual life does not develop normally and slows or stops in relation to the intellectual and moral evolution of the individual, then, in other words, the sexuality of the adult remains infantile, or the individual is an invert, or the desires of primary infancy, chased from consciousness, but still active in the unconscious, manifest themselves in neurosis and psychosis.66

The final two points of the summary describe how in normal individuals these suppressed desires manifest themselves in slips of the tongue and dreams and how “the artist, possessing in surplus, the ‘mysterious power’ to objectify his waking dreams and to ‘embellish them in a fashion which completely hides their suspect origins.’”67

On the one hand, as both the text and the photomontages of *Disavowals* demonstrate, Cahun took great interest in Freud’s characterization of the infant’s early association of pleasure with the sensual satisfactions linked to immediate needs. Furthermore, this summary highlights the contributions of “education and moral and social influences” in “helping the child resist his incestuous or perverse desires, which subsist, *forgotten*, in the unconscious.” This happens when the child enters “the age of reason.” If this does not happen properly, “the sexuality of the adult remains infantile, or the individual is an invert.” This last description is, of course, the Freudian diagnosis of someone like Cahun. We should note the coincidence of “infantile” and “invert” here—the association of homosexuality with a failure to enter the “age of reason.” When Cahun describes “a childlike world for the rest of us,” we can easily imagine that the misfits she has in mind might be those who have failed in the assumption of the “age of reason,”—those who have been “discharged,” or cast out, due to “spiritual insufficiency.”

In *Disavowals*, Cahun explicitly references this idea of the child’s entry into the “age of reason.” Immediately after evoking her childlike world and Baudelaire’s “green paradise,” Cahun goes on to explore the notion of the “enfant raisonnable”—the well-behaved, sensible, right-thinking child—who has been successfully socialized and has passed through the infantile stages of sexuality. However, rather than focus on the presumed normalcy of this kind of child, she instead explores the negative effects of undergoing “normal” sexual development and acceptable socialization.

Even the child who has entered the “age of reason” will dream about taboo subjects. Cahun asks:
Other than the inhumane, the monstrous, the impossible, what does the enfant raisonnable dream about? The ordinary. The most ordinary life has its adventures, its significant moments, its marvels. But with the permission to skim, to skip pages, pages, and pages—and to read between the lines, at leisure, as she pleases.68

We can hear echoes of Freud and Baudelaire in this passage. For Freud, even the normal child dreams of “the inhumane, the monstrous.” Cahun wishes, like Baudelaire and Breton, to celebrate the child’s ability to recognize the marvelous in the ordinary. But she also asks her readers to take account of the child’s need to forsake the prescribed linear, progress-oriented reading if the marvelous is to be recognized. The well-behaved child must have “permission to skim, to skip pages, pages, and pages—and to read between the lines, at leisure, as she pleases.” This kind of freedom sometimes given to children is, we imagine, reading between the lines, unseemly for adults. And yet this is the kind of reading that, throughout Disavowals, Cahun demands of her readers. The structure of the book as a montage of texts, the intertextuality of text and images, its allusiveness, and its repetition of themes and images ask its readers to “skip pages,” and “read between the lines.”

In the following section, titled “Two well-behaved children,” Cahun sketches a picture of the misery that ensues when children are asked to conform to social expectations in ways that go against their natures. In it, Cahun describes (in poetic, and often oblique, language) the effect of the social expectation that children aspire to the “age of reason.” She calls this expectation the “little killer of dreams.” Her description considers the effect of the “age of reason” on two children: one female, the other male. She begins with the refrain, which will be repeated later on, “Let’s try to hold onto our pain/grief [notre peine] until dawn ....” Then we are introduced to a girl who, like the straw doll of Mlle X, has begun to conform to the social expectations of the “enfant raisonnable.” Cahun observes, “Look how she has already transformed herself, how she has molded herself to the mask of inexpressible ennui.”69 The term Cahun uses here, “ennui,” evokes the writings of the Symbolists, Baudelaire’s longed-for escape in his poems of the ideal. Ennui connotes not only boredom and sorrow, but a kind of numbness. Such a feeling would be absent from the “green paradise” that Cahun, following Baudelaire, envisaged earlier in the chapter. Holding on to their pain, the children in this passage strive to feel, to feel something, even pain, rather than succumb to the numbing of social constraint:

Two well-behaved children [enfants raisonnables]

Let’s try to hold onto our pain until dawn ...

Already she transforms herself, molding herself to the mask of inexpressible ennui.

On the verge of sleep let’s try to hold onto it, to keep it alive. I want to deprive myself of joy in order to nourish it. So that it will fatten itself with the least edible words in the dictionary. So that it will devour me. So that it will hang over me. I want to feel it weighing on my shoulders. For already I trail behind me too many corpses.

Make it grow, little killer of dreams, make this justifiable reality grow. (That will be the least of your exploits.) You favor what is at the expense of what might be, such is your profession. Protect life, even if it is more amusing to kill dreams.
But there, you see, it’s finished, one mustn’t daydream about it anymore: you have so marvelously assassinated all the sorcerers that your superfluous blows will redden your hands.70

This passage is extraordinarily sad. I interpret it as expressing the pain of succumbing to the age of reason, and struggle to continue to feel intensely, as a child—the struggle to keep the ennui of adulthood at bay. The imagery at the end of the first long paragraph is especially striking: “I want to feel it weighing on my shoulders. For already I trail behind me too many corpses.” This last line has a distinctly Surrealist tinge, nightmarishly evoking a young child dragging corpses behind her. Are they, perhaps, the parts of herself that she has been forced to kill in order to acquiesce to the “age of reason”? The magic, the fascination, polymorphous desire, and self-love that the child is imagined to embody?

As the text goes on, the narrator addresses what she calls the “little killer of dreams.” “Make it grow, little killer of dreams,” she says, “make this justifiable reality grow.” The “reality” that will grow is associated with the status quo by the claim that follows: “You favor what is, at the expense of what might be.” This privileging of the ordinary and the acceptable will be had at the cost of killing dreams. And while the passage remains metaphorical, it seems that the “little killer of dreams” is associated with the end of childhood, with the development of the age of reason. The “little killer of dreams” has wiped out the magic of which the child dreams—the “sorcerers” have been “assassinated.”

The text now shifts to describe the situation of a boy who has already submitted to the age of reason. Here, the narrator continues to address the activities of the “killer of dreams:”

Already an obedient child, still docile. You will find him dressed in garish colors, surrounded by happy toys: they are innocent, varnished, vulgar, possibly gilded ...

You take him in your arms and holding him above the crowd, you will show to him the eldest son of the rich man with his precious toys … the sober sumptuousness of his clothes: “Look carefully, little one, see what you are lacking. And all the rest is bad taste.”71

In this passage the “already obedient child” is made to feel inadequate when the “killer of dreams” encourages him to compare himself with a wealthier child of higher social status. To conform to social expectations, she suggests, is necessarily to compare yourself with others and, through this comparison, to recognize your own inadequacies. This passage suggests that Cahun is interested not just in sexuality (like Freud) but in the wider social pressures on children to conform to conventional expectations. Unlike Aurige, who loves herself and accepts herself, this child will always see what he lacks. The child’s imagination is now directed toward imagining an impossible perfection that corresponds to conventional expectations of success.72

Cahun’s account makes it clear that she views social conformity not only as a killer of dreams, but also as a “killer of loves.” Just as the boy was forced to despair at his inadequacy, the narrator suggests how social expectations of romance act as killers of loves. The narrator describes how aspiring to an ideal vision of love can, like exposing a happy child to a wealthier child’s more elaborate toys, create impossible expectations that doom love to failure:
Little killer of loves, I had so many lovers before this (all men were my lovers); how well you knew how to separate me from them! Your divine skill toppled each new pedestal, and the statue, no longer worthy of my worship, crashed at our feet.73

In this passage, the narrator describes a “little killer of loves” who quashes her desire by pointing out the flaws in her lovers. Each of the narrator’s loves fails to conform to social ideals and is knocked from its pedestal as its flaws are revealed to the narrator. Now the narrator’s lover “becomes no longer worthy” of her worship. Thus the child is deemed inadequate but also his/her choice of love object is seen as unworthy. As the passage goes on, the narrator rebels against the “killer of loves” and rejects the ideal that has been set for her. She says to the “killer of loves,” “It’s time you lost your power.” As she has done in chapter III, Cahun here contrasts the consequences of idealization—imposing impossible norms and expectations—with what her own acceptance of that which exists (the “leftovers,” the “rest of us”), even if they do not conform. The killer of dreams, the killer of loves, are metaphors for this normative idealization, which asks us to conform to ideal social expectations, which prevent us from imagining “morality and other loves.”

In these, the central chapters of Disavowals, Cahun explores paradigms of femininity. They engage, in particular, with the ways that the dominant culture refuses to admit sensuality, sexuality and self-acceptance in to its ideals of the feminine. While Cahun embraces the Freudian description of childhood sexuality, she balks at the normalizing model that Freud proposes. His model, she suggests, is a killer of dreams, a killer of loves. It requires the repression of sensuality and the sexual impulses, the ability to prevent the dream from erupting into ordinary waking life. The texts of these chapters, with their critiques of conventional femininity, suggest that the normalization of these creative and loving impulses is a problem not only for those of uncertain gender or sexuality, like Cahun, but for all women, indeed for all children. Calling for self-making, for the embrace of dreams, for the embrace of feeling, for the embrace of love, these chapters of Disavowals propose alternative models of subjectivity and desire.

“Society! It’s all over between us”74

Cahun ends chapter V with an attempt to define her own desire, to imagine a loving relationship unconstrained by social ideals. Here the narrator, who seems to take on the voice of Cahun in its most personal form, addresses her lover. The passage retreats from the critique of the wider social predicament to address the specifics of a relationship:

I would like:

To be similar enough to you that I never shock you, displease you, quarrel with you, ask your forgiveness—or your mercy.

To be sufficiently different from you (and from me), varied enough, for you to recognize yourself in this man, and from far and up high, make fun of him without repercussions …
I would like to be worthy of being considered by you with as much curiosity, as much
detachment, as the gods, as the dolls of the human soul.

For the rules of the social game (which I would like to change) are not made such that I
might ever be able to win the game against the rest of the world; they are such that I will
never be able to win, against you—against us—against the best of myself, without cheating.

I would like … I want.75

Ultimately, Cahun shifts from desiring change to blaming herself, and from
blaming herself to recognizing her gratitude toward her lover:

I wallow in pointless recrimination, and it keeps me away from not only wanting, and
choosing, but (in consequence) accepting your help. I push myself to the limit, I finally
realize it and for want of anyone better, complain about me to myself: I believe I’ve only
myself to blame.

But it’s you who endure it, listen to it, see it when you have to (I show it to you).

Once more, you have read it, you are reading it, you will correct the mistakes in my French.

In the final analysis, it always falls back on you.76

Here Cahun has turned from a critique of the dominant culture to an examination
of how she might, herself, negotiate it. And, as in chapter II of Disavowals, the
solution is found in a dialogue with her partner. Her description of her lover’s
willingness to indulge in a self-recrimination that is associated with a lack of
conformity to social expectations (“it’s you who endure it, listen to it, see it when
you have to”) transmutes into a description of Moore’s willingness to engage with
and collaborate on Disavowals. The passage continues, “it’s you who endure it,
listen to it, see it when you have to (I show it to you.) Once more you have read
it, you are reading it, you will correct my mistakes in French. In the final analysis,
it all falls back on you.” Collaboration in the relationship, collaboration in art—
the one informs, even becomes. the other. Subjectivities imbued with sensuality,
leaving aside social restraints, and accepting imperfections in love and art—this
is what Cahun envisions. Indeed, I would argue that, when Cahun writes “it all
falls back on you,” she alludes not only to her partner’s engagement with her
text, but also to Moore’s collusion in her life. For Moore is one to whom she
will never have to say as she did in the epigraph to chapter V: “Forgive me for
existing.”

Notes

1 Claude Cahun, Aveux non avenus (Paris: Éditions du Carrefour, 1930), 58, anthologized
in Cahun, Écrits, ed. François Leperlier (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 2002), 242. See also
Claude Cahun, Disavowals; or, Cancelled Confessions, trans. Susan de Muth (Cambridge,

2 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 73, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 257; Cahun, Disavowals, 61.


5 Cellophane was invented by a Swiss expatriate chemist, Jacques E. Brandenberger, and was being produced by 1912 by the French company La Cellophane SA. It was soon widely available, even being imported to the United States by Whitman Candy for use in its *Whitman’s Sampler*. See David A. Hounshell and John K. Smith, *Science and Corporate Strategy: DuPont R&D, 1902–1980* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 170. Cellophane was introduced to the French public in 1912 in an article in *L’Illustration*. During the First World War the cellophane produced in France was limited to eye protection for gas masks. After the war, production increased, and cellophane became a popular fad.

6 The *Auriga* of Delphi is currently in the Delphi Museum.

7 Auriga is best known as a cluster of stars in the Milky Way that contains Capella, the sixth-brightest star in the winter sky. The star, Auriga, was associated by the ancient Greeks with Erichthonius, the charioteer. The mythology of Auriga is multiple. Sometimes it is described as symbolizing Erichthonius, son of Athena and Hephaistos (Vulcan). He is sometimes described as a divine snake child who had two serpent legs like the first humans. Athena is said to have raised him secretly, placing him in a chest or basket. He was taught many skills and is described as the first to harness horses to a chariot in imitation of the sun. He eventually became a king of Athens. Auriga is also sometimes identified with Myrtilus, the charioteer of King Oenomaus of Elis, and a son of Hermes. Ian Ridpath, *Star Tales* (New York: Universe Books, 1988); Theony Condos, *Star Myths of the Greeks and Romans: A Sourcebook Containing the Constellations of Pseudo-Eratosthenes and the Poetic Astronomy of Hyginus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1997), 49–54; Robin Hard, *The Library of Greek Mythology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 132–33; Pierre Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1996), 150.

8 The birth of Erichthonios resulted after Hephaistos chased Athena and tried to make love to her. Athena, renowned for her chastity, would not permit it, and the excited Vulcan ejaculated on her leg. In disgust, she wiped the semen away with a piece of wool and threw it on the ground. Erichthonios was born from the seed that fell on the earth.


11 For Freud, the narcissist remains in a regressed state out of which normal subjects develop by redirecting their libidinal energies toward an ego-ideal that is conditioned by cultural approval. Cahun’s ideas about Narcissus both accord with and depart from Freud’s in interesting ways. Sometimes she describes Narcissus as in love with his own image in a way that seems to ignore what Freud would call the ego-ideal. However, when Cahun discusses Narcissus’ investment in the ideal image by imagining everyone looking in a mirror to be struck by the plight of Narcissus, she offers an alternative interpretation of narcissism. Here Freud’s ego-ideal (the image of conventional expectations) is another kind of narcissistic trap. See “On Narcissism: An Introduction.” in Sigmund Freud, *Freud: General Psychological Theory* (New York: Scribner, 1963), 56–82.


In “On Narcissism” (1914), Freud writes: “Women, especially if they grow up with good looks, develop a certain self contentment which compensates them for the social restrictions that are imposed upon them in their choice of object.” Freud’s views were popularized in France by Angelo Hesnard in *Psychologie homosexuelle* (1929). As Amy Lyford notes, this text “aimed to categorize and describe the [male] homosexual psyche using a Freudian conception of the male homosexual’s primary narcissism, which included a deep attachment to and identification with the mother and an autoerotic attraction to people of one’s own sex … Hesnard, following Freud … imagined male narcissism and male homosexuality to be symptoms of a ‘perverse’ masculinity.” Amy Lyford, *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 143–4.


The reference to Aurige’s self-transformation in the mirror, combined with the notion of the illusion extending itself to others, recalls the discussion of “neo-narcissism” we saw in chapter II.


Ibid.


See, for example, Claude Cahun, “Réponse à l’enquête de la revue *Inversions,*” *l’Amitié* no. 1 (April 1925); Claude Cahun, “Réponse à l’enquête: ‘Quelle a été la rencontre capitale de votre vie?’” *Minotaure*, no. 3/4 (December 1933); Claude Cahun, “Réponse à l’enquête: ‘Pour qui écrivez-vous?’” *Commune*, no. 4 (December 1933).


On the launch of the Bureau of Surrealist Research, see Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, trans. Alison Anderson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 63–7. This *enquête* was announced to the public in 1928 and would be published under the title “Recherches sur la sexualité.” As Amy Lyford discusses, the respondents were mostly men and the discussion centered on male sexuality. For an excellent discussion of the survey and its connections to the photographs of Man Ray, see Lyford, *Surrealist Masculinities*, 145–9.


Ibid.

31 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 63, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 247; Cahun, Disavowals, 55.


33 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 64, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 248; Cahun, Disavowals, 55.

34 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 66, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 250; Cahun, Disavowals, 57.

35 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 64, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 248; Cahun, Disavowals, 56.

36 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 66, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 250; Cahun, Disavowals, 57.

37 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 72, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 256; Cahun, Disavowals, 61.


39 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 99, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 285; Cahun, Disavowals, 86.

40 Ibid.

41 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 100, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 286; Cahun, Disavowals, 87.

42 Ibid.

43 It is possible that Cahun was aware of 1929, a limited luxury edition of poems by Louis Aragon and illustrations by Benjamin Péret with explicit photographs of sexual intercourse by Man Ray. The photograph Printemps includes a clear view of the anus that has affinities with Cahun’s flower. See Lyford, Surrealist Masculinities, 147.


49 Freud, Three Essays, 40–41.

50 Freud writes, “the opposition between two currents, which runs through all sexual life, is already developed: they cannot yet, however, be described as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, but only as ‘active’ and ‘passive’. The activity is put into operation by the instinct for mastery ... the organ which more than any other, represents the passive sexual aim is the erotogenic mucous membrane of the anus.” Freud, Three Essays, 64.

51 I am indebted to Honor Lasalle and Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s analysis of this photomontage, to my knowledge, the first of its kind. Lasalle and Solomon-Godeau
Reading Claude Cahun’s *Disavowals*

(“Surrealist Confession,” 10) have argued that this “burro” image of Cahun also appears to be an image of vaginal birth and describe the three figures with arms extended that cut diagonally across the photomontage as “womb shapes.”


In addition, as Honor Lasalle and Abigail Solomon-Godeau have pointed out, one can read several elements of the photomontage as evocations of vaginal birth. For example, the heads of Cahun that we described as “hear no evil” can also be seen as heads passing though vaginal openings formed by arms and hands, and the “see no evil” figures as womb-like shapes. Seen in this light, the childhood face of Cahun encircled in arms starts to look like a child Cahun descending from the womb, directly addressing our gaze as she emerges. If this is the case, perhaps Cahun is giving birth to herself in her reimagination of a woman not enclosed in the trappings of conventionality and femininity. Lasalle and Solomon-Godeau, “Surrealist Confession,” 10.


Camille Vettard, “Opinion d’un profane sur Freud,” *Le Disque Vert* 2, no. 3 (1924): 20. Vettard was a mathematician and literary critic who is probably best known today for articles on Marcel Proust in relation to Einstein and time that he published in the mid-1920s.


The text describes him shutting “himself up inside his dreams” and despairs. Even when the child is docile, his only alternative will be to escape inward, to “shut himself up in dream.” And from this position, in the embrace of dream, the “well-behaved” child rebels: “But suddenly, his despair enflamed him. He held on to the imperfectible, he will not let it go.” This is the moment when the child accepts himself and his world, when he allows himself to stop pursuing the social ideal, when he allows himself, as Cahun described earlier in the chapter, to dream of “the ordinary.”
Games, Dreams and Surrealism

Illusion and truth are twin children who have swapped their pink and blue ribbons so often that if I were to call each by the name of his color I would cause them to be mocked, even if it turned out that I was right.¹

... I mean with these games to lead lovers into treacherous harmonies, into the dangerous agreement of those who go on equal footing/go around as pairs.²

The visual imagery of the photomontages that open the final chapters of Disavowals is marked by three intersecting themes: games, shadows and dreams. Each theme is played out in relation to issues of desire, and each is used to unmoor conventional ideas about gender and romance. The montages play with our expectations about the connections between vision and knowledge, substance and dream. These chapters employ playful allusions to games and dreams to question norms of art and love and demonstrate Cahun’s interest in the themes of sexuality and desire from both a psychoanalytic and an artistic perspective. The last part of the book contains many affinities with Dada and Surrealist interests and artistic strategies. For the Surrealists, games, dreams and visual confusions between substance and shadow were means to subvert rationality and convention, and to unleash the unconscious.³ They were tools in the Surrealist fight against the conservatism of interwar culture. Sometimes these were put to the task of overt political critique, but the Surrealists also often used their texts and images to create unexpected juxtapositions. They collaborated on drawings in the “exquisite corpse” game, for example, and wrote texts with multiple authors. The images and texts of Disavowals are in sympathy with the Surrealist interest in dreams and the unconscious as alternatives to the horrors of rationality, as well as with the collaborative strategies of Surrealism. In Disavowals, Cahun and Moore apply their deconstructive and often witty imagery to the task of evoking alternative conceptions of human subjectivity, gender, sexuality and morality. In addition to critiquing conventional ideas, the photomontages and writings in these chapters propose alternatives to them. They draw the reader/viewer along with them in reconceptualizing art and desire according to their own alternative vision.
5.1 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Faceplate for Chapter VI entitled X. Y. Z. in *Aveux non avenus*, 1930.
Shadow Games

The photomontage that opens chapter VI of *Disavowals* (Figure 5.1) plays with and confuses boundaries between shadow and substance, between real and unreal, much as it confuses boundaries between male and female. As the quotation above, which is drawn from the end of the chapter, suggests, Cahun wants to blur the boundaries between illusion and truth as well as their associations with gender. In the photomontage, photographic elements, which traditionally carry the status of the index, or trace, of the real, are combined with extremely detailed graphic elements in ways that lead the viewer to question which parts of the image are more “real” than others. Cahun and Moore create a world in which the boundaries between substance and shadow become indistinguishable. Chapter VI is titled “X. Y. Z. (lying).” It opens with an epigraph that introduces the theme of shadows and immediately unsettles the reader’s assumption. The epigraph reads, “Never let go of the shadow for the prey” (“Ne jamais lâcher l’ombre pour la proie”). Here, Cahun plays with the French adage: “Il ne faut pas lâcher la proie pour l’ombre,” a saying that means “Don’t confuse the substance with the shadow.” In her epigraph, Cahun reverses the terms, commanding her reader to prize the shadow over the real. The phrase “don’t confuse the substance with the shadow” dates back to Aesop’s fables, but it was more memorably popularized in France in La Fontaine’s version, “Le Chien qui Lâche sa Proie pour l’Ombre.” In this story, a dog that holds his recent catch in his mouth sees himself reflected in the water of a river. He drops his prey in order to pursue the reflection. When the river’s waters become agitated, the dog is left with “neither the shadow nor the body.” It is no accident that Cahun chooses to subvert the moral of a retelling of the Narcissus myth. Like Narcissus, who mistakes his own image for a beautiful boy and can never attain the ideal he pursues, the dog loses his bone because he pursues its reflection—because he believes that the reflection (or in the story’s title, “the shadow”) is more real that the prey. The shadow, like Narcissus’s reflection, suggests rather than shows. These visual parallels with the real often distort reality in the process of suggesting. They have the capacity to set off chains of associations beyond what appears in the world’s concrete substance. Cahun privileges the shadow or reflection over the real in her epigraph, “Never let go of the shadow for the prey.” And she and Moore keep shadow and prey, unreal and real, in balance in the photomontage, giving us a variety of analogues for the real—the photograph, the shadow, the drawing. In doing so, they ask the viewer to question her assumptions about representation and truth.

A large shadow rises from the lower right of the photomontage. The shadow, like the mirror image and the photograph, has an indexical relation to the real. It is cast by an object in the world, an object with substance. However, the shadow is a fiction, created by Cahun and Moore, and manipulated, like the photographic elements, in a play between substance and shadow intended to disrupt any easy sense of the real. Initially we see the profile of a man smoking, yet the overall form evokes not a human body, but the angular base of a chess piece. Are we meant to imagine a huge human-headed chess piece outside the frame, looking in, perhaps playing the game? The silhouette of the shadow suggests that the figure that is its source is smoking a cigarette. But the plume of white smoke
rises from the shadow of the cigarette at an angle that makes it look like real smoke, not a shadow of smoke. If the smoke is rising from the shadow, perhaps the shadow itself is real, and burning.

Toward the top of the photomontage, at the back of the chessboard, we see the photograph of a bare white hand atop a drawing of an arm wearing a dark glove. This element emblematizes the question of substance versus shadow in much the same way as the plume of smoke rising from the shadow cigarette. The photograph of the white hand rests on a glove that is rendered graphically and appears flat, as if empty of substance. Yet the arm attached to the glove is rendered three-dimensionally. Does the glove contain a hand? It is difficult to tell whether the glove is made of substance or shadow. Significantly, their colors—the black of the glove and the white of the hand—reiterate the contrasts on the chessboard, evoking two sides of the game. The play between substance and shadow, reality and artifice, confuses our certainty about the relationships evoked by the photomontage. On the one hand, we have trouble defining what is real and what is artificial. On the other, we are led to wonder about the subject depicted. Who is playing the game? What is the relationship between the hands in the background, the shadow of the smoking man, and the people they evoke? Is this a game played by people, or a game that somehow plays itself?

A chessboard in the midst of play fills most of the enframed space. The game’s players are not clearly visible, but we are given signs of their presence. First, as we have seen, in the foreground at the right, the shadow of a man smoking a cigarette looms over the board. This “man” has a silhouette that is far too angular to represent a person. Indeed, the shape of the torso suggests that he may in fact be a giant chess piece casting a shadow on the board: it is as if a piece normally manipulated by a human player of the game has exited the board in order to play itself. The opposing player(s) might be indicated by the arm with a black glove that reaches on to the board, but the glove appears to be empty, and the arm that extends from it is rendered in a flat style. A white hand resting on top of it evokes a substantial hand. Together, these arms describe a diagonal with the shadow man, perhaps suggesting the opponents participating in the game of chess. However, neither side of the game appears to be inhabited by a human player. At the center of the board, a card has been thrown face down, intervening compositionally between the shadow head and the hands. Two other cards are prominently placed in the foreground, face up and directly adjacent to the shadow head. To the right of them, a black chess piece, surmounted by a man’s head and torso, hovers over the board.

The imagery of games dominates the photomontage that opens chapter VI of Disavowals. On the one hand, the picture directly evokes games of cards and chess. However, the photomontage also toys with its viewers’ assumptions about the real and the unreal, substance and shadow, male and female, love and romance. The same theme opens the text of the chapter. In an excerpt from the opening text that I use as the epigraph here, the narrator refers to the images and texts of Disavowals as “these games.” Once we begin to read, it becomes clear that the text (which is divided into sections by little heart and lip ornaments) refers to the game of love. And the games are intended not to reinforce common ideas about love, but rather to propose an alternative, “to lead lovers into treacherous harmonies” quite unlike conventional romance.
I imagine the card at the center being thrown down just as the chess piece is thrown away from the board, as if the game of chess were being rejected in favor of the game of cards. This unknown card has been thrown directly in line with the large shadow head, like a gauntlet, by the handless glove behind it. The card seems to interrupt the game of chess. Significantly, Cahun and Moore juxtapose the game of chess, a game in which strategy is foremost and nothing is left to chance, to cards, where chance plays a larger role. This card evokes the notion of chance as well as the idea of the unknown, and thus alludes to the quotation with which we began, as the games lure lovers into treacherous harmonies of the unknown. The choice of these games—chess and cards—creates a visual game that parallels the text in unmooring the reader/viewer’s assumptions.

The game of chess, with its pieces that serve as agents for human players, was described in the 1920s, as today, as a representation of social roles, each with its own relation to power. André Breton describes chess in the first “Manifesto of Surrealism,” published in 1924, as the emblem of reason and the real, and a metaphor for bourgeois life. Breton’s reference to chess arises in the context of his critique of the conventional novel, faulting the “realistic attitude,” in which “the purely informative style … is virtually the rule rather than the exception.” Breton laments the authority with which writers of the conventional novel manipulate their characters and their readers, and imagines the author of such a novel as a chess player manipulating his characters as if they were pieces:

Breton likens the rational and conventional to a particular kind of chess game in which the moves are “readily predictable” and the pieces are of “this readymade human type.” Each piece has a given role and a certain number of available moves. Decisions in the game, when correctly played, should be rational choices, many of them foreordained by logic. Chess matches between rational opponents contrast greatly with the Surrealist embrace of the irrational. Indeed, in Breton’s Surrealism, chess becomes a metaphor for the rationalization of human behavior, as distinct from the Surrealist poetic, in which the irrational life of the imagination infiltrates everyday experience. (Breton’s discussion of Freud and the importance of dreams in Surrealism begins a few paragraphs later in the Manifesto.)

Breton’s symbolic use of chess raises some interesting issues about the photomontage that opens chapter VI. For Breton, the chess piece symbolizes the conventional man “paraded to and fro across the world” by the powers that be—a “readymade human type,” and chess is an emblem of the kind of
rationality that Breton despises. Yet in this photomontage, at least one piece is not “readymade,” but made to order by Moore and Cahun. The floating chess piece reminds us of the giant chess piece we have imagined as the source of the shadow. Its base mimics the photographically rendered pieces on the board. However, unlike them, this piece is drawn by hand and then endowed with a photograph of the head and torso of a bare-chested man. Whereas the indexicality of the photograph links it to the “real,” its status within the fiction of the photomontage intentionally confuses the viewer as to what is substance and what is fiction. The arms of the photomontaged chess piece are cut at the elbows, evoking the broken limbs of classical statues. The particularity of the photograph of the man clashes with the references to the chess piece and the idealized antique statue. The half-chess piece/half-man seems to have been thrown into the space of the viewer, which suggests that the viewer shares that space with some unknown gigantic chess-piece-man whose shadow looms over the board—a piece that is presumably playing the game rather than itself being manipulated. Cahun and Moore seem to be drawing on chess’s associations with the rational, and the chess piece’s symbolic role as the conventional bourgeois subject, in order to question those associations. A powerless object that usually would be manipulated by an all-powerful player (Breton’s omniscient author) is transformed into the master force behind the game.

The pieces that Cahun and Moore chose to photograph have interesting relationships with gender. While we cannot tell whether this figure of the chess piece/player is manipulating the black or white pieces, we do see the most valuable pieces in play on the board. In the photomontage there is a white king in the lower-left corner, and a white queen (the most valuable piece) at the upper right with a black king adjacent to it. Thus this game of chess can be interpreted to offer a setting in which typical relations between gender and power are undermined.

The play of king and queen on the chessboard is paralleled by the cards in the lower-left corner. They are face cards. Having noted the presence of the king and queen on the chessboard, the viewer’s initial response might be to assume that the cards are also a queen and a king. Looking more closely, however, we see that these cards are far from ordinary. In the French deck of cards, each face card has a name based on a historical or mythological figure, and the words inscribed on these cards clearly identify them. On the left, the Jack of Hearts is identified as “Lahire,” named after Étienne de Vignolles, also known as La Hire, a famous warrior who fought alongside Joan of Arc in the 100 Years War in 1429. The card on the right is the Queen of Spades, identified as “Pallas,” named for Pallas Athena, goddess of war, wisdom and the arts. Neither figure, however, resembles those of the traditional French playing deck. Instead, they sport the black jackets, cravats and demeanor of dandies. The figure representing the queen is clearly masculine and smokes a cigarette, while the face of the Jack of Spades appears to be a drawing of Cahun. The genders of the Jack and the Queen are unmoored. Cahun, playing the role of a gallant man, poses as Lahire, the warrior sidekick of that famous cross-dressing, role-defying heroine warrior, Joan of Arc. Has the Jack been transformed into a woman? Has Cahun turned into a man? And what kind of “man” is Cahun/Jack/Lahire anyway, if he plays the sidekick to a cross-dressing female warrior? The cards raise questions about gender conventions and play with accepted roles. In
the following chapter, Cahun writes: “Shuffle the cards. Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me.”

The cards also play with expectations of romance and romantic love. In this way they are directly connected to the texts that open the chapter. The sub-sections of the chapter are separated from each other by tiny drawings of lips and hearts, suggesting love and kisses. Looking back at the cards after having read the text, the reader is likely to add romance to the interpretation. The heart to the right of the card bearing Cahun’s features resonates with the hearts interspersed in the text. Now, the faces of the Queen and Jack appear to look seductively at one another. This theme is carried on in other areas of the photomontage. For example, now that the idea of romance has been introduced, we might interpret the element at the upper left, the bare hand resting on top of a gloved hand, as the image of a couple’s loving touch.

The linking of shadow with games in this photomontage also evokes the use of games in Surrealist films of the 1920s. Some of the imagery overlaps—especially in relation to the game. Chess was a prominent theme in René Clair’s film *Entr’acte*, which was first shown in Paris in 1925 during the intermission for Francis Picabia’s “instantanist” ballet *Relâche*. The film is composed of narrative sequences acted by Picabia’s friends, including Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and Eric Satie. A recurring element of the film is the image of Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp playing chess on a rooftop. It seems likely that Cahun and Moore, given their interest in theater, film and Dada, would have seen the performance and film. In another example, Jean Cocteau’s surrealist film *Blood of a Poet* was finished in 1930, and under production at the around same as Cahun and Moore were making the photomontages of *Disavowals*. Like *Disavowals*, *Blood of a Poet* is full of autobiographical elements. There are some interesting affinities between this film and Cahun and Moore’s photomontage for chapter VI. Both feature games of cards, and each includes a reference to an armless classical statue. In Cocteau’s film the statue resembles the Venus de Milo, which Cahun and Moore had featured in chapter III of *Disavowals*, and which the male torso of the chess piece in this photomontage mimics. Cocteau’s statue of Venus (impersonated by the female Surrealist photographer Lee Miller) plays cards, thus creating imagery that is often interpreted as an emblem of the game of love. She also entices the main character into a frightening dream world. While the connection between the imagery in the Cocteau film and Cahun’s work may reflect similar interests, we have evidence that Cahun was interested in Cocteau, as she was in much avant-garde theater and film in the 1920s. In a letter describing her life in Paris in the 1920s, Cahun recalls writing short reviews for the journal *Aux Écoutes* that included “des notes sur des expositions de peinture, des réunions Cocteau–Picabia, etc.”

Cahun’s desire to disrupt our notions of the real has many affinities with Surrealism. Surrealists sought to disrupt our confidence about the perception of everyday life, and their works often describe the world of shadow as more important than conventional “reality.” One of Cahun’s friends and favorite poets was Robert Desnos, whom she photographed around 1930 (Figure 5.2). Breton described Desnos in the “Manifesto of Surrealism” as the one who, “more than any of us, has perhaps got the closest to the Surrealist truth,” and he published a volume of poetry titled *The Shadows (Les Ombres)* in 1927. His most famous love poem, “I Have Dreamed So Much of You,” was also published in 1926 in
La Révolution Surréaliste. This poem centers on the play between love and shadow. Desnos writes:

I have dreamed so much of you that my arms, used to embracing your shadow, and finding my own chest, would not be able to bend around the contours of your body perhaps.

And that, despite the real appearance of the one who has haunted and governed me for days and years, I would no doubt become a shadow.¹³

In this poem, the narrator dreams of his lover. The image in his dreams threatens to become more real than the actual love object. The melancholy tone of Desnos’s poem—his description of being “haunted” and his fear that he himself will lose substance and become a shadow—stands in contrast to Cahun’s use of the epigraph, which celebrates the creative potential of shadow. The reference to the shadow in the epigraph, “Never let go of the shadow for the prey,” suggests a privileging of the shadow world. Cahun, like many of the Surrealists, explores this human propensity to chase shadows: does the shadow, like the dream, have more creative value than the “real”? It is both an emblem for a philosophy and an explicit reference to the photomontage that opens the chapter, in which the real and the shadow, sign or index of the real are difficult or impossible to distinguish. A key point for Cahun is the malleability of the shadow, once captured, and its capacity to be restructured it according to one’s wishes, as she and Moore do in their photomontages. In Cahun’s text, as in Desnos’s poem, the shadow is an emblem of the subject’s desire. For Desnos, this desire leads to dreams or fantasies that begin to substitute for the substance of the world. While Desnos’s narrator implies that he is the victim of this structure, the photomontages and writings of Disavowals take a different attitude. The shadow world is itself the goal, offering the ability to imagine possibilities that might allow for new structures of desire. These are described, albeit in allusive language, in the text of chapter VI.

Singular Plural: Games of Desire

Chapter VI opens with an elaboration of the imagery introduced in the photomontage. The text evokes romance, shadow puppets and games—
challenging, or perhaps even mocking, conventional ideas of chivalric romance. The title, “Singular Plural,” suggests an alternative—a pair or “plural” that is different from the conventional romantic relationship. The initial text is itself divided into short vignettes that are separated by tiny lips and hearts. Here is the first vignette:

Singular Plural
Us.
“Nothing can separate us.”
Love sermons: sincere lies!
(If you don’t agree to play the idiot from time to time, as often as it pleases me, give up thoughts of marrying the stamens with the thorns. For others, the magic of love [“la magie rose! ... ”].
In the final analysis, one is compelled to return to the unknown with a big algebraic X.14

This passage gives some sense of the way the text immediately undermines its own claims. First a fantasy of romantic love: “Us. ‘Nothing can separate us.’” This opening line, which is placed in quotation marks to indicate one lover speaking to another, is an oft-repeated cliché of romance. The sentiment expressed is immediately undermined by the following line: “Love sermons: sincere lies!” This line refutes the notion that there is such a thing as love in which “nothing can separate us.” The text thus pits statements by a hopeless romantic that parrot a romanticized image of love against those of a more cynical (or practical?) respondent. In a parenthesis that expands on the thoughts of the more cynical voice, the text reads, “If you don’t agree to play the idiot from time to time, as often as it pleases me, give up thoughts of marrying the stamens with the thorns. For others “la magie rose.” “Magie rose,” or pink magic, is the name for a kind of magic dealing with the sentiments; love potions and charming spells fall into this category. The passage puns on the word “rose,” which denotes both the flower and the color pink. Unless the romantic partner in the couple “agrees to play the idiot ... as often as it pleases me,” for the more cynical partner, there will be no rose (the stamens and thorns will not come together to create it) and the magic of love will fail. This remark demystifies the fantasy of “la magie rose.” The passage offers readers a familiar vision of romantic love replete with trite claims about “us,” but also immediately calls attention to the reverse of that romantic paradigm—the fact that it most often depends upon an unequal partnership in which one member of the couple “plays the idiot.” We know who plays that role in conventional heterosexual couples—the helpless maiden rescued by the heroic prince.

Yet the passage is not intended to debunk the mythology of romance. It also points out, like Desnos’s poem, how desire depends on shadows—how its object is fantasy—whether it be a fantasy of romantic love (as in “nothing can separate us”) or a belief in the image presented by one lover to the other (as when one plays the idiot). The text is tied to the photomontage in that it asks the reader to consider the relationship between substance and shadow in romance. Does all love depend on this kind of willed fantasy?, it seems to ask. Is love a charm in which one lover is duped by, or dominated by, the desire of the other?

In the passage that follows, Cahun begins to allude to an answer to this question. The title repeats a phrase from the passage above, “Magie rose:”
Pink magic.

Absolute egoism is a security. I will go there often. But I mean with these games to lead lovers into treacherous harmonies, into the dangerous agreement of those who go on equal footing/go around as pairs [qui vont par paires].¹⁵

In this vignette, several themes we have already encountered are reintroduced: egoism, games and collaboration. They add up to an alternate formula for charmed love that Cahun will elaborate in the following text. First, the narrator tells her lover that the “absolute egoism” that Cahun toyed with at such length in chapter II and throughout the book will act as a safety net—a self-absorption to which she will inevitably return for security’s sake. Yet the narrator will also turn to games that spark the magic of love. She says: “I mean by these games to lead lovers into treacherous harmonies.” The games played here offer an alternative to the unequal partnership of romantic love—what Cahun calls a “treacherous harmony,” a harmony that is hard won and never taken for granted instead of the “nothing can separate us” of romantic fantasy. Indeed, the games to which Cahun refers will offer a vision of a different kind of love than that conventionally defined. She wants, that is, to use games to define a relationship in which one partner is not required “to play the idiot” to the other; instead the two are on an equal footing. The word “games” refers to the text that follows in which, as we shall see, two lovers play roles, each for the other, reciprocally, in order to sustain desire.

However, the “games” are not only an example of an alternative construction of desire; the word refers more generally, I think, to the images and texts of Disavowals. When Cahun says, “I mean by these games to lead lovers into treacherous harmonies,” she writes with the hope that Disavowals, with its playful visual and textual rhetoric, will encourage readers to consider alternatives to conventional desire. For Cahun and Moore are always playing with the expectations of the readers/viewers of Disavowals. Indeed, as we discussed in the introduction to this book, Cahun described Disavowals as an attempt to shock people out of their complacency.¹⁶ In this particular case, the narrator hopes that playing will incite viewers to imagine a “treacherous harmony,” a “dangerous agreement.” Such an agreement—dangerous because it goes against traditional expectations—will undermine the unequal relationships mandated by the dominant paradigm of romance. It will produce instead a creative relationship in which both partners stand on an equal footing: an agreement to collaborate in the creation of desire, in the magic of love.

In the next passage, Cahun offers a poetic definition of love that points to the kind of game she envisions:

Love. The act itself is the work of the flesh—flash of summer lightning, a star so brief that one doesn’t even have the time to make a wish, even less to be certain we’ve even glimpsed it—but everything that engenders it, everything it implies, all the good old theater wires, are the creation of the mind.

The actor can make use of his partner, better: of his opponent, as he would himself; reciprocally.¹⁷

Love is fragile, bright and brief. It is not the romantic eternal of “nothing can separate us.” Further, love is not connected to truth in the classic sense. Rather,
it relies on fantasy, on shadow—it does not simply exist, but is created and sustained by the lovers—“engendered” by “theater wires”—as participants, like shadow puppets, play roles that are “a creation of the mind.” Here, Cahun seems to ask her readers to acknowledge that, like puppets, we may be playing predetermined roles in romantic love. Cahun turns this ostensibly depressing proposition to her advantage. If “all the good old theater wires”—the strings that control our romantic roles—are not “real,” but a creation of the mind, we should be able to imagine a different paradigm: “The actor can make better use of his partner, better: of his opponent, as he would himself; reciprocally.” The theater of desire is, Cahun suggests, a game (hence the use of the word “adversaire”—opponent). One does not need to play a predetermined role. Rather, one can improvise (“make better use of one’s partner”) rather than following a prescribed role—and this improvisation can be reciprocal. As in a game of chess or cards or an improvised theater piece, each player sets up the next move for the other.

Cahun describes this game of love, an attempt to imagine a kind of desire in which each partner participates equally. She continues:

Beyond self-contained narcissism, the couple divides itself. We exit from our superb isolation, we lend ourselves to the world. My lover will no longer be the subject of my drama, s/he will be my collaborator.¹⁸

There are two key themes in this passage: first, the leaving aside of “self-contained” narcissism; second, the shift from the lover’s being the “subject of my drama” to “my collaborator.” Interestingly, in this description, the “self-contained narcissism” is a description of the couple itself. In order “to continue provoking each other” (to continue the improvisation we discussed above), the alternative couple will not remain in isolation but will, instead, “lend ourselves to the world.” I love this phrase. It suggests the possibility of retaining the integrity of each individual and of the couple while opening up those two narcissisms. This reconfiguration of narcissism, related to the neo-narcissism we discussed in Chapter 2, allows for a shift: “My lover will no longer be the subject of my drama, s/he will be my collaborator.” We can understand the significance of this shift by contrasting Cahun’s description of the couple with Desnos’s description of his relationship with his lover or Breton’s relationship with Nadja. In these examples, the lover is so much the subject of the author’s drama as to be wholly created by him. The images of Breton’s Nadja and Desnos’s shadow lover created in their texts tell us more about Breton and Desnos than they do about the women themselves. The subjectivity of the loved object, the object’s own desire, is barely even part of the picture. In contrast, Cahun hopes to imagine a relationship in which “my lover … will be my collaborator,” thus attributing an active role and an independent subjectivity to the lover.

As the passage continues, Cahun proposes a model of what it might mean to “collaborate” in love. Central to Cahun’s imagining of the alternative model is the notion that each member of the couple will acknowledge the other’s desire. Equally important, each member of the couple actively responds to the desire of the other. Together, the partners will choose their roles, enact them, and move on in a kind of synergistic mix and match of attraction:
As soon as they have become one, in order to carry on provoking each other, and to continue to spur each other on, they will have to cheat.

To find comrades ... For the hero, for the heroine and their conjunction, it will be necessary for us to descend into the street and look for models. Separate ourselves. Mask ourselves. To make a new skin and a new landscape each night. This is the price of our duels. To move beyond our defeats. To imitate, simulate the first comer who pleases you and suits me, to reconstitute the diamond of a look, the charm of these passersby. I am one, you are the other. Or the opposite. Our desires meet one another. Already it's an effort even to disentangle them.19

Note here the mobility of place and identity: they “make a new skin and a new landscape each night.” And their role-playing is both reciprocal and dependent upon the desire of the other. The roles “pleas[e] you and sui[t] me,” until the individual desire of each dissolves in the collaboration: “I am one, you are the other. Or the opposite. Our desires meet one another. Already it is an effort even to disentangle them.” Here we see an example of a scenario that might create the intersubjectivity imagined early on in Disavowals. And even if this collaborative subjectivity is possible only in the imagination, the words and images of Disavowals remain a record of that imagining and a beacon for others who might be looking for alternatives. This is the neo-narcissism of love in which Cahun and Moore create a “Singular Plural.”

The text of “Singular Plural” addresses more than collaboration in love. The game of desire described in the text is collaborative, but so, too, Cahun suggests, are the images and texts of Disavowals. In the text, this reciprocity in love seems to enable collaboration in art. To begin with, the title refers directly to the process of writing. “Singular Plural” describes a paradoxical grammatical construct—a noun that is both singular and plural. Furthermore, the description of the lovers’ game is followed by a description of writing. In the very next passage, we read:

I make a copy of this exercise (which my partner wrote in the desired time and with my own hand) in order to demonstrate how we seek to draw the boundaries of our characters.20

Now, the game of desire is also connected to a collaboration in writing, and this collaborative writing is linked directly to collaborative subjectivity. The text is dense and requires some unpacking. “I make a copy of this exercise ...”—the text itself is an exercise, something like the game it describes, to be practiced, repeated over and over again—like an athlete’s drills. The passage goes on: “I make a copy of this exercise (which my partner wrote in the desired time and with my own hand) in order to demonstrate how we seek to draw the boundaries of our characters.” “My partner wrote the passage—not me,” says the author. I am only copying it. But even further—my partner wrote it “with my own hand.” How could that be? Who is the author here? And this, Cahun quips ironically, “is how they draw the boundaries of our characters.” In writing, as in love, reciprocity, permeability, a tricky interspersing of self and self. Here Cahun elaborates a dream of intersubjectivity in which distinctions between self and other literally, even physically, break down. I am not trying to claim that Cahun and Moore literally wrote Disavowals in a collaborative
effort akin to some Surrealist texts. Rather, for Cahun, the creation of the book is completely connected with her sense of self; to imagine her subjectivity as intertwined with her partner would also be to imagine her partner as an author of the book.

This kind of rhetoric—this questioning of authorship, the interspersing of selves in collaborative partnership—appeared elsewhere in *Disavowals*. In chapter II, where Cahun first introduced the notion of collaborative subjectivity, it was coupled with a similar description of a passerby on the street. Remember that the text we have just discussed said “we descend into the street and look for models.” Here, again, is the key sentence from the earlier chapter: “What does it matter to me, Passerby, to offer you a mirror in which you recognize yourself, though it be a deforming mirror and signed by my own hand?” This passage has many things in common with the one we have just analyzed. In one, “my partner wrote in the desired time and with my own hand”; in the next the “deforming mirror” in which “you recognize yourself” is “signed by my own hand.” If we can see the “exercise” as a reference to the text, the “mirror” described here should be interpreted as a reference to photography and photomontage. The two passages should be read as descriptions of the same endeavor: a game of capturing and simulating a passerby, a game whose media the reader of *Disavowals* already knows; by the time she gets to the section of text we have been considering, is not just the theater of the street, or the theater of love, but also the making of this book, a game whose play depends upon producing images like those that introduce each chapter of the book, images of selves that cannot be fully known, in a game that must be continually played for reciprocity to continue. Treacherous harmony in love and art.

**Games, Dreams, Politics**

In addition to employing games and dreams to propose alternative structures of desire, Cahun also puts them to the task of political critique. In particular, she calls attention to the horror of the First World War and its aftermath, and takes to task the powerful leaders and diplomats whose decisions both begin and end war. Toward the end of chapter VI, we read a text titled “Revolving Table [*Table Tournante*] (dream).” The *table tournante* was the French term for a table around which séances were held. In such a séance, each participant took a turn channeling messages from the beyond. This activity became popular in France in the mid-nineteenth century and continued to be used as anything from a parlor game to a spiritual practice. In chapter VI of *Disavowals*, the dream’s narrator recounts how, “Seated around their green rug, the diplomats, who are as serious as children, sucking their pens ... draw up the Treaty of Versailles in automatic writing.” “Automatic writing”—writing without conscious control—had been practiced in France by spiritualists as a way of accessing the occult and was also used as a psychological tool long before it was taken up by the Surrealists. The Surrealist use of automatic writing was described by Breton in the first “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924). Removing it from the spiritual or therapeutic realms, the Surrealists used it as a technique to access the unconscious as well
as a tool for creative endeavor. In addition, we know that some of the Surrealists explored occult activity such as the revolving table in the early 1920s, a time often referred to as the “period of trances.” The Surrealists saw the revolving table not as a route to spiritual phenomena but rather as a way of accessing the unconscious. To suggest that the Treaty of Versailles, the treaty that ended the state of war between the Allied forces and Germany in 1919, was not a carefully considered document, but the product of a revolving-table session and the practice of automatic writing, clearly shows a disdain for conventional politics. Thus, from the beginning of this dream narrative, Cahun registers her disdain for the politicians responsible for the destruction of so many lives and her sympathy with the Dada and Surrealist protests against the First World War and its aftermath.

The dream passage continues: “the spirit whispers: pigeon flies, prison flies, nations fly ... they would hear me talking, they are so wise!” Cahun’s text evokes the game of “pigeon vole” (pigeon flies), a children’s game “in which the participants have to determine if a chosen object can fly or not,” coming up with nonsense images in the process. This kind of game was employed by the Surrealists as another way of provoking the unconscious. Indeed, Cahun’s dream narration of “pigeon flies” may be inspired by the Surrealist play *Comme Il Fait Beau!* (1923), a collective work written by Desnos, Breton and Benjamin Péret. The play, which is a collage of texts, was published in *Littérature* in February 1923. One section of the play involves an exchange between monkeys playing “pigeon flies.” The monkeys pursue random flying objects or concepts. The sequence goes: pigeon, crisis, red, God, suicide, volcano, sinus and so on. While Cahun refers to the same techniques used by the Surrealists, Cahun’s “dream” text is not random. Instead, she evokes objects that are connected to one another and to the meaning of the dream. The Treaty of Versailles has direct connections to both prisons and nations. Thus, in her writing, Cahun uses the game in a very conscious manner to pursue a witty political critique.

In the dream, the most serious negotiations to have taken place in the twentieth century are constructed through divination and Surrealist automatic writing, both of which require that the writers abdicate their reason and responsibility and become mere vehicles for irrational worlds. Cahun parodies the diplomatic process, saying:

> I have seen the great German leader, short on dreams, copying from his French neighbor. A bit of luck for the Prussian that he himself was copying from his German neighbor! ... soon they all looked like conspirators to me—and the table revolved with the needles of time, or rather space ... But who were they all copying? Whence the initial impulse? I am lost in this. At length their outstretched arms impel their papers, folded like accordions, toward the center, where the invisible arbitrator gathers them up ... and shuffles them in his old bowler hat. And now, just like in innocent games, the lots are drawn to see who, who, who will be eaten.

As Susan de Muth notes, the “papers, folded like accordions,” are connected to the Surrealist game of the “exquisite corpse,” in which each participant writes or draws on a paper, then folds it over so that his contribution is hidden, and passes it on to the next player. The last line, where “the lots are drawn to see who, who, who will be eaten,” also imagines the creation of the treaty as a game involving
“a children’s song in which lots are drawn on an imaginary boat lost at sea to see whom the others should eat first.”

Cahun’s dream narration is both funny and horrifying. It demonstrates irreverence for and suspicion of contemporary political culture at its most serious. This is in keeping with Dada and Surrealism. However, it also seems carefully calculated. This is not the kind of dream narrative we find in Surrealist journals of the 1920s, nor an example of automatic writing. Rather, Cahun carefully constructs a parody of contemporary politics using Dada and Surrealist methods for her own purposes. Thus, while the dream incorporates the Surrealist interest in the irrational and the unconscious, the dream itself is narrated with a tone closely linked to the kind of overt political critique launched in German Dada and taken up later by some Surrealists in the 1930s. By the time of this more overtly political period of Surrealism, Cahun would be closely associated with the group. In the 1930s she became a member of the Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires as well as the anti-fascist group Contre-Attaque, which opposed the compromise positions of the Popular Front government.

Here, once again, we see one of the key differences between the use of games by Cahun and the use of games by the Surrealists in the 1920s. For Cahun, the game is always evoked with an aim in mind—be it imagining collaborative subjectivity or launching political critique. Thus, while the meanings of Cahun’s images and writings may be multivalent and difficult to discern, there is nothing “automatic” about them. Her juxtapositions of disparate objects are always consciously chosen and aimed at directing her readers to think critically about the subjects she is evoking. This is very different from Breton’s early ideal of unleashing the unconscious through automatism. While automatism is by no means the defining feature of Surrealism, even Cahun’s most “surrealist” texts are never really aimed at creating automatism. There is also too much at stake for Cahun, as a woman who wishes to be an artist, to consider automatism as a valuable strategy. In the dominant culture, women were already thought to be divested of authentic subjectivity—were already considered to be, in some sense, automatic. They were said to have little self-control. Their bodies and physical cycles were imagined to dominate their intellect. They could not possess “genius.” Because Cahun was invested in critiquing these associations with femininity, her relationship to automatism had to be different from that of many of the male Surrealists. Cahun used Surrealist-inspired tools to critique the dominant culture. She was interested in dreams and the imagination as keys to imagining alternate structures of politics, of desire, of art making. However, she never embraced “psychic automatism.” Cahun’s feminism makes her refuse the “automatic.” Indeed, the “‘Revolving Table’ dream” is, in some sense, a critique of the very notion that automatism could liberate anyone from the politics of the day. The dream centers on those politics and addresses the issue of imprisonment—“prisons fly, nations fly.” The reader is clearly meant to be both amused and horrified by the idea that the Treaty of Versailles might as well have been drawn up using automatic techniques.
Nightmares

The next chapter, titled “H. U. M. (fear),” opens with a nightmarish photomontage (Figure 5.3), and the text begins with the recounting of another dream. Both the text and the montage are replete with terrifying and violent imagery in which personal and potentially political meanings overlap. In the photomontage, Cahun and Moore superimpose X-rays of ribs, bird skeletons, body parts and scissors with a variety of pictures of Cahun, many of which we recognize from previous images in the book. The most prominent portrait of Cahun is featured at the top toward the center. Here we see the same masklike photograph that appeared repeatedly in the collage that opened chapter I (see Figure’s 1.1, 1.2, 1.3), only this time a pistol is held to her head. Just to the right, another image shows Cahun using her hand to protect her face. Directly below this, at the bottom center of the photomontage, a terrifying head of a flayed man, replete with protruding veins, extends from a tuxedoed torso. At the upper right, we see the same tuxedoed man, skin intact. The overlapping multiple exposures of his head give the impression that it is being shaken, or pulled. The violence of the photomontage is striking. Once we see the flayed man, the image in which Cahun protects her face resonates all the more. Out of the flayed man’s shoulders, X-rays of a human chest appear, but these also double as arms or even wings. Similar X-ray images compose much of the montage’s background.

Having just read the dream alluding to the First World War in the previous chapter, the reader is, I think, encouraged to see the violence of the photomontage as related to the violence of war and its aftermath. The image juxtaposes modern technologies of destruction (the pistol) and diagnosis (the X-ray), and links them to the destruction of the male body in ways that call to mind the horror of technologized war. This is reinforced by the beginning of the nightmare text, titled “Wrecks,” which opens the chapter. Cahun describes looking at “a man’s face: skin pock-marked, battered, granulated.” while “an X-ray passes over my head.” As Amy Lyford has observed, in the 1920s the streets of Paris were crowded with war-wounded men, and their wounds were far different than any that had come from previous wars. While the imagery and text seem to be connected with the violence of the First World War, Cahun’s dream of the man with the battered face also has a personal resonance. She says of the man, “There is a silence between us, an obstinacy. It must be my father.” Later in the dream, Cahun accidentally pulls off her father’s arm and is horrified by the “bit of warm viscous flesh” she holds. The flesh turns to wood, and Cahun realizes that she is holding not her father’s torn-off arm, but a wooden panther. This imagery evokes the dismembered limbs and wooden prostheses of the war-wounded. Thus, in this dream, Cahun imagines that her father suffers from the kind of horrible wounds, both psychological and physical, that resulted from the technological war. At other points in the text of the chapter, Cahun describes the futility of war. For example, she writes:

Visa versa.

The desertions increased. The malcontents emigrated from one kingdom to the other ... (All Germans can move to France and all the French to Germany but Berlin and Paris will be no less at loggerheads; Lorraine and the Ruhr will not confront each other less.)

Here, war is imagined as futile and inevitable.
5.3 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Faceplate for Chapter VII entitled H. U. M. in Aveux non avenus, 1930.
Dreams and Other Loves

If I vibrate with vibrations other than yours, must you conclude that my flesh is insensitive?35

At the same time as the horrifying imagery alludes to war, the photomontage and the dream are full of elements that had personal meaning for Cahun. Much of the same imagery we have discussed as evoking the horrors of war also seems connected to Cahun’s reimagining of art and sexuality. The photomontage is dominated by pictures of Cahun. The large head of Cahun at the top with the gun pointing to it has two bodies—a huge set of X-ray ribs making up a torso and, at the center of the torso, a smaller headless body with arms and legs crossed. The
large face of Cahun echoes the *commedia dell’arte* masks in the lower-left corner of the image. They, in turn, resonate with the upside-down head floating directly across at the lower right. This is also a head of Cahun, this time with graphically stylized hair that transforms her into a Medusa. This part of the photomontage is taken from a photograph in which Cahun posed on a white pillow with white sheets blocking out all but her head (Figure 5.4). In another version of the photograph, the sheets and pillow have been cropped out, suggesting that the purpose of taking this photograph was, from the start, to create a Medusa-like image (Figure 5.5).

Just below the large face of Cahun at the top of the photomontage, we see a bird’s head at the left and, at the right, Cahun in profile with her head shaved. The photograph of Cahun in profile is related to her cover for Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes’s novel *Frontières Humaines*. This photograph was based on a self-portrait she took in the early 1920s in which she posed in profile, imitating a photograph of her father (Figure 5.6). These portraits, which emphasize the aquiline nose of Cahun’s profile, call attention to Cahun’s Jewish identity. At the same time, they link her to the many images of birds with hooked beaks, including the bird to the left, that appear throughout the montage. In her early publications, Cahun adopted the pseudonym “Claude Courlis.” A “courlis” is a curlew, a type of bird characterized by a long, slender, down-turned beak. The representations of birds are, on one level, a symbol of Cahun herself. A drawing of such a bird is placed directly below the profile picture of Cahun, and it extends out from what appears to be a stone female torso that is missing both a breast and an arm. The long, serpentine head and neck of the curlew emerge from the bottom of the torso, which has been endowed with a white, up-turned appendage. It seems no accident that this torso with dismembered limbs is
placed in close proximity to the Medusa head, even connected to it by a white line that highlights the seam where the photographs used to make the montage are cut by scissors. The upside-down Medusa’s head, placed as it is at the bottom of a slit, takes on a clitoral resonance. Here it is worth noting that Freud had connected the myth of Medusa with the fear of castration. It is as if Cahun is jokingly negating the possibility that the missing limbs might signify castration by adding the bird’s head and neck (which allude to Cahun herself) to the torso where a penis would be if the torso were male. Cahun thus wittily poses herself as both male and female, both penis replacement and clitoral bump.

Following down from the beak of the curlew, a drawing of a pair of white scissors cuts through the huge beak of another monstrously large bird. Above
that bird’s head we see two more birds, one a skull attached to a skeletal neck, the other intact and pointing its beak directly at the large image of Cahun. Finally, in the bottom-right corner of the photomontage, another bird is labeled with a sign that reads “rossignol,” or nightingale. This bird, together with the others, immediately brings to mind the work of Max Ernst. By this time, Ernst had also begun to include a bird he called Loplop (the artist’s alter ego according to some accounts) in the margins of many of his paintings, drawings and prints. In one of Ernst’s classic Surrealist works, *Two Children Threatened by a Nightingale* (1924), figures run terrified through a dreamlike setting; the bird itself appears benign despite the title. In Cahun’s montage the bird appears terrified and wounded. On its chest, a wound like a stigmata leaks white fluid in a shape that resembles a theater mask. The bird’s eye is a white orb that has a cord coming out of it. Its head tilts back, as if it were overwhelmed by the scene before it. A sharp, snake-like tongue and teeth emerge from its beak. Clearly this is no ordinary bird.

Birds, including the nightingale, are explicitly referred to in the text that opens the chapter. The text is titled “Wrecks [Épaves] (nightmare).” The title “épave” implies not just destruction, but also stray or abandoned objects. The birds make their appearance after Cahun has encountered the terrifying face of her wounded father and run away:

I find myself walking … my breath still uneven with some faded terror … can one give in to such monsters? And above all when in such a short time so many curlews’ beaks have to be cut off!

After every café, all the even numbers, a stuffer of birds. More easily than I had thought, and without leaving any traces, I pass my fist, arm, through the window and with my curved scissors cut the beaks off at their roots … Sparrows, seagulls, hares, partridges … None of them must be left!—But the one I am looking for, without knowing how it is made, and just to see how it is made, is the nightingale’s beak, with its false teeth, with its painted tongue.37

The passage evokes the multiple birds in the photomontage, as well as the scissors that cut off the beak of the largest bird. Taken together, the imagery of the photomontage and the dream suggest Cahun as both the one who cuts and the one whose former identity at least (as Claude Courlis) is being excised by a snip of the scissors. As if in a textual homage to Ernst, paralleling the visual allusion in the montage, Cahun says she wants to snip off the beak of the nightingale to “see how it is made.” This reads as a kind of dissection of Ernst’s Surrealist technique. In keeping with her interest in illusion or artifice, Cahun is particularly interested in the aspects of the nightingale that are artificial—“its false teeth,” “its painted tongue.”

One way to read this passage and the imagery in the photomontage would be to say that Cahun cuts off the beaks of the birds she associates with her patrimony—both the characteristic hooked nose of the “courlis” she inherited from her father and the beak associated with the nightingale and thus the Surrealists. Solomon-Godeau, Lasalle and Dean interpret these images and texts as allusions to castration. That such an image might be interpreted as a parody and critique of the Freudian Oedipal drama should come as no surprise, given what we have already learned about Cahun’s attitude toward the assumption of normative sexuality as described by Freud. Toward the end of the dream,
when Cahun encounters her father in a train station, just before she pulls off her father’s arm, she tries “to convince him, with whatever idea I can think of in the tumult, of my genius, of my bravura ... But I don’t have enough time. His train arrives and he won’t slow down ....” As her father runs for the train, they both continue to hold on to each other’s hands, and, as he pulls away, Cahun is left with her father’s dismembered limb. Seen in parallel with the cut-off beaks, the dismembered arm also seems to be a symbolic parody of the castration complex. Cahun makes the association with castration abundantly clear in the following section. “To the glory of Freud,” opens the section immediately following the dream: “So many people make love without knowing it ... It’s time to teach them how to do their job.” The significance of castration anxiety for the development of normative heterosexuality was introduced to French readers in the early 1920s in Freud’s “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.” Cahun’s mention of Freud, together with the notion that people must be taught the proper way to make love, seems to allude to the castration metaphors in the dream.

We can take this interpretation even further if we think about the text of the dream and the photomontage in conjunction with the epigraph to the chapter. The epigraph is drawn from a line from Cahun’s Héroïnes essay “Salomé the Skeptic:” “Before renouncing this world I will dance before Herod because he is interested in my sleep and could compel me to retrace my steps, to reweave my dreams.” The epigraph to the chapter alludes to metaphors of castration by evoking the story of Salomé, whose dance before Herod led to the beheading of St. John the Baptist. In Cahun’s version of the story, Salomé is an actress and an aesthete. She agrees to dance before Herod not because she is interested in enticing men, but because Herod “is interested in my dreams ... Besides, he promised to pay me a royalty.” Carolyn Dean describes her as a “camped up Salomé, the castrating woman whose expert beak shearing testifies to her courage and intellectual prowess.” Remembering this epigraph when looking at the scissors and the upside-down head directly adjacent to them suggests that cutting has some connection to retracing, reweaving or redoing—as when Cahun and Moore cut and rearrange the elements of the photomontages. But in the Héroïnes essay, Cahun’s Salomé is not only an aesthete—she is one whose desires differ from the conventional paradigm. At the end of the essay, Salomé asks: “If I vibrate with vibrations other than yours, must you conclude that my flesh is insensitive?” Salomé claims for herself alternative forms of art and desire. Dean has argued that while Cahun refuses to define lesbianism as a category, Cahun is interested in giving voice and image to lesbian desire. While Dean’s argument focuses on Salomé and the imagery of castration, I would argue that there are further textual clues to this aim at the end of chapter VII.

At the end of chapter VII, in a passage titled “MORE FEAR THAN GOOD,” Cahun imagines a context in which same-sex female desire is not considered a “crime.” The title plays upon the French phrase “Plus peur que mal” (more fear than harm), which roughly translates as “It could have been worse.” Cahun again alludes to the contrast between good and evil; at the same time, the meaning shifts to suggest that “It could have been better,” which warns the reader that the passage below will propose improvements to the status quo. She tells her lover that she would rather build than destroy:
Demolition business:

Is that really to my taste, my love? It’s a last resort. I want to build. I don’t lack the materials. It’s my plan that displeases me—When you seek shelter, do you cause trouble? In order to justify my house, which would take up little space, would it suffice that I agree to live there myself?47

In this passage, Cahun moves beyond the Surrealist use of games, dreams and Freudian theory to “lay waste to family, country, religion,” and imagines how her critique might ultimately end in the construction of new paradigms, the building of a new “house.” And I don’t think it is an accident that she chooses the house as a metaphor, for it is an emblem of family. Cahun wants to build an untraditional house in which she and her lover can live. The passage continues:

Bad habit [mauvaise habitude]:

If I can’t agree to it, it is proof that I no longer know how to live alone. What a dilemma!48

The French phrase “mauvaise habitude” contains within it the root of the verb “habiter,” which means “to reside in” and alludes to the desire to create a house. But a “habitude” is also a custom, and clearly, for Cahun, conventional customs are bad. At the same time, the sentence that follows the phrase “bad habit” suggests that the habit that should be broken is the habit of “living alone.” Why, Cahun seems to ask, should one such as she be condemned to live alone by the prevailing (bad) customs?

This questioning is reinforced by the phrase that opens the next section of text, “Faute de mieux.” This is the subtitle of the epigraph that opened chapter II, which reads “Moi-Même. Faute de Mieux.” (Myself. For lack of anything better). Cahun seems to be rejecting the notion that living alone is an adequate response to her dilemma. Indeed, she is proposing the need to build a house in which an explicitly lesbian sexuality can live:

For want of anything better [Faute de mieux]:

Is the world so badly made that a being who is unusual, but sexually sociable, should be constrained to take refuge in crime as in a convent, not only to live there, but there to create new values! …49

She describes herself as unusual and sexually sociable (non-normative in the realm of sexuality) and with the reference to the female space of the convent (albeit a convent of “crime”) alludes in no uncertain terms to lesbianism. Her desire is not merely to live in the “convent” but to use it as a place in which she might construct new values. The last part of the passage makes clear that her “crime” is not an action she has committed but her mode of being. She writes ironically: “even before I was born, I was condemned. Executed in absentia.”50

This description seems to end on a depressing note, yet a few pages later the reader is met with the aphorism “It’s not enough to be vanquished; one must also know how to turn defeat to one’s advantage.”51 This statement will appear again as the epigraph to the following chapter. And this, it seems, is one of the main tasks of the book: to take advantage of Cahun’s marginal status and use
its insights to offer, as she puts it elsewhere in the text, “morality and other loves.” Immediately following this call to action, Cahun offers another image that counters the absolute, celebrates the finite, the relative and the benefit of chance that the Surrealists were also championing:

Finite, mortal, relative.

Joy and sadness. Finally here are these parallels that meet in love. But love, it’s not the infinite—on the contrary, it’s the thing most certain to be finite. In the absolute, nothing happens by chance, such meetings would never take place.52

Love is, Cahun suggests, contrary to all cultural myths about ideal love, dependent upon the finite, the mortal, the relative. Love is a product of the chance and the source of art.

Cahun sees herself and others like her—those left over and rejected by the culture at large—as the exceptions that ultimately become the source of art. At the end of chapter VII she writes:

I'm obsessed with the exception. I see it as bigger than nature. It’s all I see. The rule interests me only for its leftovers with which I make my swill. In this way, I deliberately downgrade myself. Too bad for me ...

The abstract, the absolute, the absurd, are a malleable element, a plastic material, the word one appropriates. What I take for myself.

And so, at ease, I associate, dissociate—and formulate, without laughing, the odious rule of my collection of exceptions.53

In this passage, Cahun formulates alternative visions of art and love. Rather than striving for a romantic or aesthetic ideal that would require her to leave out imperfections and focus on “the rule,” Cahun proposes that these “leftovers” should be the material for creation and the substance of love. (Recall that in chapter V of Disavowals she wrote, “I was hoping that God would fashion, out of the leftovers of the universe, a childlike world just for the rest of us.”)54 Cahun’s interest in the “exception” is connected to the rejection of idealization we discussed with relation to chapter III of Disavowals. In this passage she describes the “absolute” not as a fixed perfection but as a “malleable element, a plastic material, the word one appropriates.” Thus Cahun rejects the authority of the absolute and uses it for her own purposes, changes it (it is a “malleable element”), brings it down from its pedestal. An absolute that is malleable is no longer absolute at all.

This rejection of the ideal is represented in the next plate of Disavowals (Figure 5.7). The photomontage that opens chapter VIII emblematizes this rejection of clarity, order and idealization. This montage, in its wild structure, looks like the antithesis of the ideal body. It is made up of a series of overlapping transparent images of Cahun. At the center of the left margin of the image, directly adjacent to the central morass of overlapping limbs and body parts, we see a pair of arms chained in iron cuffs. In their form and their color, they are mirror images: the arm on top is white, the one below is black, and each occupies a space of a
5.7 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Faceplate for Chapter VIII entitled N. O. N. in Aveux non avenus, 1930.
similar color. Light and shadow are clearly separated here but chained to each other, captives of a clear binary opposition. In the rest of the photomontage, Cahun and Moore use mirrors to create a horizontal fold that initially gives the impression that top and bottom are also opposites. However, as one looks more closely, the binary division of the montage breaks down: at least three views of Cahun’s face, one on the lower right and the two at top center, have no mirrored complement. Like the confusing mirroring within the work, the overall format of the photomontage also negates any simple divisions. At the top of the image, something close to a square juts up from the rectangle of the photomontage. Folded legs and knees project out of the flatness of the picture space like the piercing eyes of Cahun, whose head and torso are just off center. The photomontage reads as a negation of the rule of the ideal. The chapter title and the epigraph that introduce the photomontage read: “N. O. N. It’s not enough to be vanquished, one must also know how to turn defeat to one’s advantage.”

I. O. U. Self-Pride

The final plate of Disavowals (Figure 5.8) draws together many of the themes that Cahun addresses throughout the book. The epigraph to the chapter, “We get the god that we deserve, too bad for us,” demonstrates both Cahun’s irreverence toward conventional laws and her desire to create her own rules. She, we might surmise, deserves a very different kind of god than the average bourgeois of the 1920s. This epigraph echoes the irreverent tone of the text’s final chapters: Cahun’s god is not a conventional absolute god, hence the lack of capitalization. The chapter is titled “I. O. U. self-pride,” implying that, having gone through the journey of discovery and the play with conventions in this book, Cahun now grants herself her just deserts. Cahun engages with her collaborator at the very start, for the title, “I. O. U. self-pride,” plays with relationships between “I” and “you” and suggests that having “self-pride” might be a gift not only to the self, but also to “you.” In this final chapter of Disavowals, chapter IX, Cahun proposes a means of maintaining “self-pride” that counterbalances the “self-love” described in the “Narcissus” chapter. “Self-pride” is related to “neo-narcissism:” it is Cahun’s term for a subjectivity that enables her alternative models of art and interpersonal relationships. And the photomontage with which Cahun and Moore open the final chapter of Disavowals both depicts that “self-pride” and imagines its repercussions in contemporary culture. Whereas in earlier chapters the text was divided into sections by stars or lips, in the final chapter the passages alternate with a drawing of an eye, punning on the “I” of the epigraph and suggesting also, once again, the importance of the interrelationship between the “I” (the sense of self) and the “eye” that both sees the world and takes in the external (specular) image of the self. The montage is not only Cahun’s proposal for reimagining her own subjectivity, but also an attempt by Moore and Cahun to explicitly depict their alternatives to conventional mores and contemporary assumptions about the relationships between creativity and desire.

The final plate of Disavowals poses the question of subjectivity in ways that parallel the overall structure of the book. The lower part of the image is dominated
5.8 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Faceplate for Chapter IX entitled I. O. U. in *Aveux non avenus*, 1930.
by photographs of Cahun’s own face. At the left, faces are montaged together in two parallel stacks. Many are recognizable from previous photomontages as images of Cahun. We see the bejeweled forehead of Cahun as Satan in the *Mystery of Adam* (the third head down on the left—see Figure 3.2) and the blacked-out eyes of the images of Cahun from the plate that opens Chapter IV of *Disavowals* (see Figure 4.5) A face with puckered lips (second from the bottom on the right of the stack) is derived from the photograph of a weightlifter montaged into the lower-right corner of the plate we are now considering (Figure 5.9). In this image Cahun has hearts on her cheeks and a shirt that mockingly exclaims in English: “I am in training. Don’t kiss me.” This image is part of a series of photographs in which Cahun wears a light-colored shirt with dark nipples
drawn on where, clown-like, she mimics the overdetermined masculinity of the weightlifter (Figure 5.10). This series is related to the images of Cahun that we first saw in the plate opening the first chapter of *Aveux non avenus* where Cahun was photographed in harsh light, hair slicked back (see Figure 1.3). Indeed, a large image of that face sits at a diagonal at the bottom of the plate connecting the stack of heads at the left to the athlete at the right. Recognizing this face, and remembering the images from which it derived, in which Cahun’s nipples appear to be exposed, the reader/viewer must now reevaluate those original images from chapter I of *Aveux non avenus*. For the athlete’s nipples have clearly been put on as part of a costume. What had initially appeared as a part of Cahun’s body in chapter I is now revealed to be part of a costume that had been put on—even sexual characteristics are here part of a masquerade.

The theme of the masquerade is amplified by the handwritten sentences that trace their way around the faces at the left, mimicking the shape of the stack and suggesting a link between the repeated images of Cahun and the “Je” (I) of the text: “Under this mask another mask. I will not finish wearing all these faces.” The multiple published translations of this enframing text attest to disagreements about its meaning. “Soulever” is the sticking point, variously translated as “carrying,” “lifting away,” “peeling off” or “wearing.” Most interpretations of this photomontage emphasize the idea of masquerade, but Cahun and Moore evoke multiple meanings—capturing the idea of masquerade they began with in chapter I, but also encompassing the proposals of alternatives to creativity and love that have been developed throughout the book. Other translations (“to raise oneself,” “to rise,” “to heave,” “to swell”) put less emphasis on masquerade as dissimulation and more emphasis on the mask as a means of reimagining the self and of creating desire. Cahun and Moore probably intended “soulever” to be understood in the fullness of its meaning. What better definition of “soulever” than one that captures the overall rise and swell of that pile of faces? The general outline of the faces as a group and the way they rise from their base describe a shape that is undeniably phallic, an image of desire meant to resonate with the rise and swell of “soulever.” This time, rather than the images of castration we

![Image](5.10 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Faceplate for Chapter IX entitled I. O. U. in *Aveux non avenus*, 1930 (detail of Figure 5.8, *la sainte famille*).)


saw in chapter VII—the missing beaks and limbs of the photomontage and dream text—we are presented with the opposite. Cahun’s creations of self, her playing of roles and donning of masks, is the creative impetus for the work as a whole, here symbolically, playfully, evenironically, associated with sexual power and with the sign of desire. In her dream of the train station, Cahun struggled unsuccessfully to claim her “genius” when confronting her father—a process that, in the end, left her imagining momentarily that she held the “phallus.”

Here the photographic masks that Cahun and Moore create are themselves the sign of creative power, recalling the games of desire of the previous chapter, where “it will be necessary for us to descend into the street and look for models. Separate ourselves. Mask ourselves. To make a new skin and a new landscape each night … I am one, you are the other. Or the opposite. Our desires meet one another. Already it’s an effort even to disentangle them.” Cahun and Moore replace the phallic image of desire by evoking it, but then filling it with inchoate imagery.

Across the top of the photomontage we see a very different kind of imagery. At the center an image of a nuclear family—man, woman and child—is depicted on one face of a floating pyramid (Figure 5.10). A banner that reads “la sainte famille” (the sacred family) hangs down next to it, apparently attached to its upper tip. The family is frighteningly bound together: the naked male figure holds on to lines that evoke lightning bolts of energy. His arm embraces the woman, and he drags the child along by the hair. All of them are connected at the belly, and those connections stretch uncomfortably between them. Each appears to be emotionally detached from the other, looking in a different direction. This is a sinister image of the family: psychologically distant, yet bound painfully together. The child holds on to a white bird, reminiscent of the birds in the “nightmare” photomontage. This bird’s head resembles that of the two-headed dove at the top of the frontispiece to Disavowals (see Figure 0.12 and discussion in our Chapter 2), in which the doubled dove was connected to Cahun and Moore as a couple. We might understand the child figure as an emblem of Cahun before she has emerged from the nuclear family to address her own desire.

Behind the image of the sainte famille, we see drawings of Russian nesting dolls that grow progressively larger from right to left. Each doll bears an oval cut-out that reveals its contents. Taken together with the imagery of the nuclear family, they seem to allude to the pronatalism of 1920s culture, but the imagery is multivalent: the three dolls at the right contain embryonic forms that resemble the bird held by the little girl. At the same time, with their black centers and veins radiating out to the edges, they also resemble bloodshot eyes. The smallest doll on the far right appears to hold something that might be a bird, a fetus or a question mark.

Alternative versions of creativity and desire are recurring themes throughout Disavowals. The imagery of this photomontage recalls the layout of the “Singular
Plural” passage of chapter VI (Figure 5.11). In this passage, in which Cahun elaborates her games of desire, the text is framed by tiny drawings of hearts—hearts like the one on Cahun’s face in the athlete-portrait at the lower right of the plate. I take the image of Cahun “in training” to be a humorous evocation of the “games” or “exercises” described in the text. Remember that this passage began by offering a parody of heterosexual romantic love. It exposed the underside of that romantic paradigm—the fact that it most often depends upon an unequal partnership, like the one depicted in the image of the sainte famille. Later in that same passage, Cahun offers another figure for that inequality: the image of the Russian doll that resonates with the drawings at the top of the photomontage:

Each living being—Russian doll, nesting table—is supposed to contain all the others. Only the dominant one and the one who is easily impressed by his character remain.56

These lines suggest another interpretation of the plate’s upper register. These nesting dolls are not only signs of the self-reproducing bourgeois family; they are also figures of couples: the dominant partner (the doll) subsumes the other (the fetus-like figure) in his or her own image. However, if the dolls to the right of the “sainte famille” uphold this link between the reproduction of the family and romantic paradigms of love, in which one partner is subsumed within and thus erased by the other, the doll furthest to the left offers another possibility. The largest doll contains not one embryo but twins: siblings interdependent but whole, like Cahun and Moore themselves. The flag labeling the sacred family is thus poised between an image of traditional familial structures on the right and, at the left, the possibility of an alternative.

Significantly, the largest of the dolls is directly above the stacks of faces. Combined with the imagery above, the stacks of faces propose an alternative to the creative roles imagined for women in the culture of the 1920s. As we have seen throughout this book, Cahun and Moore recognized that the notions of creativity that dominated their culture were based on idealized visions of romantic love that limited women’s “creativity” to child-bearing functions. The upper portion of plate IX, with its drawings of the “sainte famille” and a series of Russian dolls, has been interpreted as an ironic commentary on the pressures on women during the 1920s to procreate in response to post-war depopulation, shifts in gender roles and the emergence of the “New Woman.”57 While I agree that this is one meaning of those figures, my interpretation of the text of Disavowals also suggests that this portion of the montage should be interpreted as an allusion to the dominant culture’s view of female creative potential and the role of women in creative partnership. The lower half of the photomontage suggests an alternative in which creativity, desire and sexuality are linked, albeit in the ironic evocation of the phallus. My definition of “soulever” goes on: “to revolt,” “to rise in insurrection.” My argument is this: the faces that dominate the lower part of the montage are not simply a masquerade but a more particular revolt against the normative definitions of creativity and desire—definitions that left no room for women. The phallus, composed of repeating images of Cahun’s face, as well as other faces that are either unidentifiable or clearly artificial, suggests an alternative to a paradigm in which male desire for a female muse defines creativity. But what kind of desire is pictured here? Surely Cahun and
Moore are not staking a claim to the same kind of phallic desire attributed to men. If they accept the fact that desire and creativity are linked, their task must be to provide a different model of the intimate relations that produce desire.

Between the flag and the heads floats a fragmentary Œ, a series of letters conjoined into one, yet meaningless without the addition of other letters. It is meant to be emblematic. It is no accident that it floats adjacent to the twins in the belly of the Russian doll in the upper-left corner of the image, which we have interpreted as an allusion to the couple’s alternative vision. In the text of the chapter, there is a passage where the word “MOI” is juxtaposed with the fragment “Œ.” Each is given to us in extremely large, bold-faced letters with a few sentences adjacent to it. The text adjacent to the “MOI” is a dialogue between two speakers in which the question of whether the one will come to the aid of the other is addressed. Thus the “MOI” text involves not just “me” but two speakers. The text adjacent to “Œ” is in the first person:

In vain, I try to put my body back in place (my body with its dependencies), to see myself in the third person. The I is in me like the “e” taken into the “o.”

Although spoken in the first person, the text is about recognizing and accepting dependency. Given Cahun’s predilection for punning in English, it seems likely that she intended multiple and complicated associations with the last phrase: “le je est en moi comme l’e pris dans l’o.” If we are thinking in both French and English, we are immediately aware that there is a “je” (in English translation “I”) in MOI—both the meaning, myself, and the letter I. The phrase “l’ê pris dans l’o” seems to refer to the “Œ” adjacent to the text. If “O” stands for the self-enclosure of narcissism, taking an E into the O breaks into the narcissistic circle. What is more, thinking about letters, we now have the letters “I” and “Œ.” In the French text “l’ê pris dans l’o” the article “the” is represented by an “L.” Put together, you are left with “œil” or “eye.” And of course we have just read about an I/eye who attempts to see herself in the third person, objectively, from the outside. In case the reader needs any more prompting to solve this puzzle, the passages in this section are line drawings of eyes (Figure 5.12). Thus the whole passage is opened and closed with images of the I. This passage is not only about the self, but about seeing the self from the outside, like the eye of a camera. And we learn that this act of “seeing myself in the third person” will be fruitless without an accomplice, a collaborator. The conjoined letters “Œ” that float next to the image of twins are a figure for the notions of collaboration, intersubjectivity, even perhaps neo-narcissism.

To the right of the pile of heads, more images of Cahun costumed in different guises: a young bohemian, a weight lifter and so on. A classical statue sails horizontally through the middle of the picture, while a strange tree-like structure

5.12 Claude Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 1930 (detail of page 236).
bearing body parts associated with the senses—mouth, nose, hand, eye, ear—sprouts from its belly. The statue, emblem of traditional art, is missing its penis and head. Knocked from its pedestal, it grasps for the barbell necessary for the exercise. This figure of toppled creativity, replaced by the fragments of the body necessary for perception and creation, forms a spatial and conceptual link between the phallic pile of heads and the image of Cahun as an athlete in training. We might imagine that the athlete represents the alternative evoked in the text: the collaborative games of desire described in “Singular Plural” and a riff on the importance of the “leftover” for a new vision of creativity.

Finally, in the center, linking these three elements, we find an inverted triangle that replaces the vision of the nuclear family with its subordinate woman and child with a cryptic, almost illegible pyramid of heads. They seem to be Cahun’s. The plate calls to mind another one of the guises in which Cahun appears in this photomontage: her role in the play “The Mystery of Adam,” in which Cahun impersonated both an angel and Satan as serpent (see Figure 3.2). Those roles and the inverted triangle in the lower portion of the plate might allude to a creation myth in the final chapter of *Disavowals*:

> On the Nth day God regretted having created the Sky and the Earth. He wanted to destroy his work. But it had already fallen into the public domain. So he descended into himself and divided Himself into three in order to attenuate his responsibility, invented the Serpent, and changed his name.59

It seems likely that we are meant to remember the photomontage when we read this myth—to think about the triangle with Cahun divided into three, and to recall the words about God, the ultimate creator (“Otez Dieu, Il reste Dieu” [Remove God, he remains God]) that flank the Russian dolls at the top of the plate. For the chapter that includes this myth opens with a title that makes a play on the words at the top of the plate: the chapter’s title reads not “Otez Dieu, Il reste Dieu” (Remove God, he remains God), but Otez Dieu, Il reste moi” (Remove God, I remain). Dieu—God—the ultimate creator—is replaced by “moi”—me.

“He invented the Serpent and changed his name,” writes the narrator in the final chapter: “Moi.” But who is moi? Moore or Cahun?

### The Unique Innumerable

Whereas the photomontage that opens chapter IX gathers many of the themes that we have seen throughout the book, the text of the final chapter brings them to a conclusion, or perhaps more accurately, a way forward. The chapter’s early pages are replete with the kind of witty and deconstructive descriptions, stories and aphorisms that we have seen throughout the text. One of them addresses the story of Narcissus and thus calls us back to the themes of self-reflection we saw in chapter II of *Disavowals*. Another plays with the deconstructive mode of address out of which these witty and ironic passages are made. For example, in a section titled “In Praise of Paradox,” Cahun writes: “Great proverbs are mirror writings, pedestal beds, perfect statues. Let’s play round and round. Each time
you come up with a sentence, it would be wise to turn it over to see if it’s good.”

Many passages parody God and the devil, good and evil, Adam and Eve.

Some of the text is overtly connected to the photomontage. As we read, we find references to the conventional family, to the idea of God, to the athlete in training, and to the masquerade, all of which are alluded to in the plate. When it is not deconstructing the status quo through aphorisms or parodies, the text addresses a series of themes that can be traced throughout the book: the status of the self, the mode of its production, the relationship between the self and other, and the role that ideals or absolutes play in these. In this final chapter, perhaps more so than in the others, the image of the self that the text posits has been colored by Cahun’s embrace of the leftover, the fragment, the exception. And in this final plate and text it is clear that she wishes to reach out beyond her own borders and offer an analysis of the relationships between self and world, a rejection of the ideal, and an acceptance of exceptions that will have implications for all of her readers.

Early in the text of the chapter, we are introduced to the idea that self-cultivation involves the individual’s creation of her own values and morals. The phrase (written in English) “I am in training; don’t kiss me” opens a passage of text. This phrase, the reader will remember, is written on the shirt of the image of Cahun in the lower-right corner of the photomontage, where she takes impersonates a clown-like athlete. The “training” barbell behind her is a kind of athletic self-cultivation that requires a temporary withdrawal from external adoration (“don’t kiss me”). Yet the passage that follows this opening phrase is not about athletic exercise. Rather, it describes the struggle to come to terms with the notion that there is no god on which she can rely, nor place blame, only herself. She says, “When I start to believe in a god outside myself, sometimes it seems that he has the upper hand: he has eternity before him … Yes, if I were freed of the intolerable distractions of misery, of love, of illnesses and also allowed to take my time, I would feel strong as he … Who knows, maybe he wouldn’t be much of a match for me?” Here, Cahun describes the struggle to reject the notion of an external god or absolute law in favor of her own rules. The cards are stacked against her from the start, however, for unlike the god to whom her culture teaches her to defer, she is haunted by mortality and by the distractions of misery, illness and love. She, like the athlete in the montage, must try to ward off the forces that threaten her self-cultivation, her autonomy. Yet it is almost comical to imagine that such a thing might be possible. She is like that clownish athlete whose cheeks are adorned with hearts and whose chest warns “I am in training; don’t kiss me,” all the while bearing a set of oversized lips that invite the pleasures of the flesh.

The philosophy Cahun has developed in the course of her creative journey is most strongly imparted in the book’s final section. This concluding section jumps forward in time to the present. The title page reads: “1928. I want to change skin, tear the old one off me.” On the next page, the text is introduced by the sentence “GET RID OF GOD, I REMAIN.” On the one hand, this title suggests that the skin that is being torn off might be the cloak of the absolute, or god: without a god to give rules and reason to life, one is left only with the self. Removing god, tearing off the skin, Cahun is laying herself bare, seeing herself unprotected in a chaotic world. But the idea of tearing off the skin is also connected to growth,
as when a snake, in order to develop further, sheds its old skin to reveal the new one. Cahun, who played Satan in the “Mystery of Adam,” may be imagining herself as the serpent, which has the ability to change his skin.

In order to understand the full resonance of Cahun’s desire to tear off her skin, we must turn to a part of the chapter in which the issue of changing skin is also at stake. Earlier in the chapter, Cahun retells the story of the Temptation in the Garden of Eden, only with a twist: rather than tempting Adam to eat the apple, Cahun’s Eve attempts to seduce the serpent and, when he rejects her, sets up the circumstances that allow him to start changing his skin. Eve calls the serpent “an old worm that asks for nothing more than to stay in his skin.” In the next section, titled “Imitation of the Serpent,” the serpent says furiously, “I am going to change my skin. You can put the old one on.” Coming as they do immediately after Eve’s disparaging description, the serpent’s words appear to be addressed to Eve. We now have the sense that the serpent is “furious” because of Eve’s goading and has decided to change his skin as a result. It is thus Eve, the woman, who is responsible for transforming the serpent into a being capable of change and renewal. And when the serpent says, “You can put the old one on” to Eve, the old cloak of change is being passed on to her and will, ironically, cover up her nakedness. The “imitation of the serpent” is thus Eve’s. In a reversal of the traditional story, Eve is not naked and ashamed but has, rather, begun to imitate the serpent—to metaphorically change her skin as she grows. Perhaps the phallic form made by the pile of heads in the bottom of the photomontage is also meant to remind us of a snake.

In the final pages of the book, Cahun suggests that the lifelong desire to transform the world has led her to an emphasis on transforming the self:

I have spent thirty-three years of my life wishing passionately, blindly that things would be other than they are. I’ve gained little more than fictional values. I don’t know what bill falls due today. But I can feel it. It consists of fulfilling the good and bad in me, whatever they may be, and with a minimum of loss …

Live and let grow in me he, she—or even it—who permitted me, still young, to understand that I must only, that I can only, touch, transform, myself.

If the universe is in the mood for metamorphoses, that can only be each person’s own business. We have no time to lose in achieving our own salvation.

Cahun begins the passage by describing her own experience (“I can only touch, transform, myself”) but ends by generalizing that experience: “We have no time to lose in achieving our own salvation.” This is Cahun’s message to her readers. Make of yourself what you wish, what you will, she seems to say. Do not wait for a god or any other rule to tell you what that should be. To do this, she suggests, is not easy. It is a struggle that she describes eloquently and poetically in the passage that follows:

The unnamable

Consciously, unconsciously, whether we squander ourselves, or save ourselves for future generations, ... if we use ourselves sperm and blood, sweat and tears, down to the dregs, if we obey ourselves, if we revolt against ourselves or admire ourselves, if we lead ourselves
on a leash like a queen, if we feed ourselves like a dog, if we are made of straw or wooden beams, if we see ourselves as beautiful and good, unique or legion, at our pleasure, at our pain, whether we feel abstract or concrete, each treats himself, should and can only treat himself according to his merit.66

The passage is structured by contrasts, offering choices to its readers. Should we “squander ourselves” or “save ourselves”? Will we “use ourselves sperm and blood, sweat and tears, down to the dregs” and destroy ourselves? Are we weak, “made of straw,” or strong, “of wooden beams”? Do we see ourselves as “beautiful and good, unique or legion”? However we assess ourselves, we are creating (or taking on) standards of judgment “at our pleasure, at our pain,” and those, she implies, should be formed from within: “each treats himself, should and can only treat himself, according to his own merit [selon son mérite].” Or, as the epigraph to the chapter reads, “On a le dieu qu’on mérite, tant pis pour soi” (Each gets the god that he has earned, too bad for them). For Cahun, god, that toward which one strives, the set of rules one follows, the morality that one avows, is an individual choice, not an absolute given.

In the next paragraph Cahun describes her own process of self-creation and transformation and links that endeavor to photography when she refers to “the silvering in the mirror,” and the “wink” of an eye. For Cahun, writing and photography are a means of self-creation:

Make myself another vocabulary, brighten the silvering in the mirror, wink, swindle myself, improve my skeleton with a fluke muscle, correct my faults and copy my actions over again [corriger mes fautes et recopier mes actes], divide myself to conquer myself, multiply myself to make my mark [m’imposer] …67

The photograph can, in fact, be linked to the previous discussion of changing skin. Each time we photograph ourselves, we in a sense create a new skin. For the photographic image is a trace of the light emanating from the subject’s body captured and frozen with the wink of the shutter. It is itself a kind of skin.68 Yet it is a skin that offers only a momentary, partial picture, dependent on light, framing, costume, camera angle, and a host of other contingencies. Thus the photograph will, in showing multiple possible selves, “divide” the self into partial visions, “multiply” the self in a series of possibilities.69 Throughout the book, Cahun has undertaken this creation of multiple selves, with the help of her lover, Moore. She calls this unending multiplicity of selves, which she describes as her “most precious treasure,” the “unique innumerable.”70

Notes


2 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 117, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 305; Cahun, Disavowals, 102.


Anne L. Birberick, *Refiguring La Fontaine: Tercentenary Essays* (Charlottesville Va.: Rookwood Press, 1996), 133: “La Fontaine muses about the frailty of human judgment. The error of the dog who accepts the sensory information, without first judging its relative truth, becomes a figure for humankind’s proneness to pursuing the shadows of truth.”


Ibid., 8–9.

The games of card and chess call on themes that also figure prominently in Dada and Surrealism. The imagery of the chess game makes many appearances in Dada and Surrealism, perhaps most famously in Marcel Duchamp’s claim that he was going to give up art to play chess. We might also note Man Ray’s *Boardwalk* (1917) and *Transatlantique* (1919).


According to Rudolf Kuenzli, “Picabia’s ‘instantanist’ movement was directed against Breton’s group, especially the First Surrealist Manifesto.” Rudolf E. Kuenzli, *Dada and Surrealist Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

“...The sequence of the chess game is interspersed with different shots of the columns of La Madeleine to the extent that through dissolves and superimpositions they are defamiliarized to the extent that they become a play of geometric forms. Through Clair’s playful association the grid of the chessboard is repeated in the cinematographic manipulation of the columns. He even superimposes the chessboard on shots of the Place de la Concorde, thus relating the chess moves to the moving traffic.”


See Katharine Conley, *Robert Desnos: Surrealism and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008). Conley describes the poem thus: “He fears that by dreaming so intently of the woman he loves he has inadvertently turned her into a mere shadow.” Ibid., 50. In the poem Desnos writes: “I have dreamed so much of you that you are losing your reality. Is there still time to reach this living body and to kiss on the mouth the birth of the voice that is so dear to me?/I have dreamed so much of you that my arms, used to embracing your shadow, and finding my own chest, would not be able to bend around the contours of your body perhaps./And that, despite the real appearance of the one who has haunted and governed me for days and years, I would no doubt become a shadow.”


Ibid.


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19 Ibid.


26 Leperlier, *L’exotisme intérieur*; see also de Muth in Cahun, *Disavowals*, nn. 94–5. p ref?


30 As Hal Foster explains: “Breton defines surrealism once and for all in Janetian terms as ‘psychic automatism,’ and, again, early surrealism was given over to automatist texts and hypnotic sessions.” For Foster, it is most important that Breton claim to be interested in giving up identity. Thus, as Foster points out, “The association suggests the full ambiguity of surrealist automatism: a ‘magical dictation’ that renders one a mechanical automaton, a recording machine, an uncanny being because ambiguously sentient, neither animate nor inanimate, double and other in one. One is possessed marvelously but mechanically, like the eighteenth-century automaton cherished by the surrealists, the *Young Writer* of Pierre Jacquet-Droz, who scratched the same words again and again—a ‘marvelous’ figure perhaps, but driven rather than free.” Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 3–5.
31 David Bate discusses the history of automatism in relation to psychoanalysis and Surrealism, paying particular attention to the relationship between automatism and hysteria in *Photography and Surrealism*, 54–87.


33 For an excellent discussion of the connections between Surrealist imagery and the psychological and physical trauma of the First World War in France, see Lyford, *Surrealist Masculinities*.


35 Cahun, *Écrits*, ed. Leperlier, 149.


40 In the original essay, Cahun writes: “before renouncing the world, I will dance before Herod, because he is interested in my sleep, and he will make me explain my dreams to him” (Cahun, *Écrits*, ed. Leperlier, 148). The essay is dedicated “For O.W.,” an obvious reference to Oscar Wilde.


42 Cahun, *Écrits*, ed. Leperlier, 149.


44 The biblical story ends with Salomé, when crossing a frozen river, falls in and her own head, severed by the ice, floats on top.

45 Cahun, *Écrits*, ed. Leperlier, 149.

46 The passage begins by evoking the idea of demolition—an idea that I would suggest is connected to the Surrealist aim to “lay waste to family, country, and religion.” See Breton, *Manifestoes*.


48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.

Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 171, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 361; Cahun, Disavowals, 148.

Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 172, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 362; Cahun, Disavowals, 145. The phrase “finally here are the parallels that meet in love” will remind the careful reader of a passage from chapter II of Disavowals, the chapter that dealt most extensively with Narcissus, which also discusses parallel lines: “Two parallel lines meet at infinity ... Words are so obliging! ... This is the verbiage of bad friends, those who know that they are failures, defeated in advance, incapable of giving us happiness here on earth, they offer it to us in abundance elsewhere, in order to make amends, opening for us an easy credit line without a guarantee for the heavens in the afterlife. We are told not to get attached to our bodies because beauty is only the play of light. Ephemeral. Illusory ... Love? ... Lovers that are too happy form a couple similar to a hermaphroditic monster or better Siamese twins. If it can’t be untied, it will be necessary to cut this Gordian Knot, this serpent’s nest ... Two parallel lines meet at infinity ... I have never been able to appreciate this definition. What defines infinity for me?—You can see that I do not have a scientific mind.” Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 33–4, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 213–14; Cahun, Disavowals, 28–9.

53 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 177, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 367; Cahun, Disavowals, 152.

54 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 100, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 286; Cahun, Disavowals, 87.

55 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 171, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 361; Cahun, Disavowals, 148.

56 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 119, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 307; Cahun, Disavowals, 103.

57 For an excellent account of shifting gender roles and the discourses (pronatalist and otherwise) surrounding them in interwar Paris, see Mary Louise Roberts, Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

58 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 236, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 430; Cahun, Disavowals, 202.

59 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 234, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 428; Cahun, Disavowals, 200–201.

60 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 214, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 409; Cahun, Disavowals, 186.

61 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 214, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 408; Cahun, Disavowals, 185.

62 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 231, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 425; Cahun, Disavowals, 200.

63 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 220, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 414; Cahun, Disavowals, 190.

64 Cahun, Aveux non avenus, 233, in Cahun, Écrits, ed. Leperlier, 427; Cahun, Disavowals, 200.

65 This shift in voice, from the personal “je” to the more general and communal use of “nous” suggests that counter to the claims of those who see this book as an expression of
Cahun’s own narcissism, it is in fact intended to represent a journey that can and should be more broadly construed.


68 In a famous essay on the stereoscope, Oliver Wendell Holmes refers to the photograph as a skin “Every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their skins and leave the carcasses as of little worth.” Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Sterograph,” *Atlantic Magazine*, July 1859.


In following Cahun’s and Moore’s experimentations with the “unique innumerable” throughout this book, we have seen a subtle and canny critique of the social consequences of heterosexual norms. Our journey has taken us from an exploration and critique of the way ideals of heterosexual romance inculcate gender, to the grappling with visions of narcissism and the proposal of neo-narcissism, to notions of collaborative subjectivity, creativity and desire. We have seen a wholesale questioning of the ideal and the absolute, the elevation of the leftover, the fragmentary and the overlooked. In this complicated and poetic series of images and texts, we have been taken on a journey with a purpose: “If the universe is in the mood for metamorphoses, that can only be each person’s own business. We have no time to lose in achieving our own salvation.” With this compelling phrase, Disavowals asks its reader to take an active role in changing the world. And, indeed, both Cahun’s and Moore’s activities would become increasingly political after the publication of Disavowals.¹

From the time of her introduction to André Breton by Jacques Viot in 1932, Cahun was actively involved with the Surrealists and increasingly concerned with anti-fascist politics. In the early 1930s Cahun participated in the literary section of the Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires, and she and Moore were signatories to many of political group’s declarations. In 1934, Cahun wrote and published a pamphlet, Les Paris sont ouverts, which defended artistic freedom and advocated that “indirect action seems to me the only efficient action, both from the point of view of propaganda and that poetry.”² This statement made overt and public the philosophy underlying Disavowals: that a visual and poetic work might have greater efficacy by taking its readers/viewers on a journey that indirectly encouraged them to see things differently thus and “exist otherwise” than it would by telling them what to think. When, in 1935, Breton and Georges Bataille founded Contre-Attaque, Union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires, Moore and Cahun signed the resolutions that declared the organization’s goals. Cahun exhibited works in the Exhibition of Surrealist Objects in the Charles Ratton Gallery in 1936 and traveled with the Surrealists to the international exhibition in London. The objects she made in
the mid-1930s treat many of the same interests and some of the same imagery we have seen in *Disavowals*. In 1936 she illustrated a book of poetry by Lise Deharme, whom she had met through Breton.

Cahun and Moore left Paris in 1937 for the Isle of Jersey, where they would spend the rest of their lives. They bought a large house on St. Brelade's Bay in a secluded section of the island. When the Germans invaded Jersey in 1940, Cahun and Moore remained on the island and began a guerrilla counter-propaganda campaign against the German forces that Cahun called in her memoirs, in language reminiscent of the individualist/collaborative mode of *Disavowals*, “an individual battle together.” Moore was fluent in German, and the two composed and distributed texts signed by the “Soldier without a Name.” They tucked the pamphlets into newspapers and coat pockets, attempting to sway German soldiers into mutiny and give the impression of a large anti-Nazi conspiracy within the German ranks. They were eventually discovered by the Nazis and arrested in 1944. While in prison, they unsuccessfully attempted to fulfill a joint suicide pact. They were sentenced to death in November 1945. Their death sentence was deferred, and they were left in prison until the island's liberation in May 1945. When they returned to their house, they found that most of their work had been destroyed. Claude Cahun/Lucy Schwob died on December 8, 1954. Her partner, Marcel Moore/Suzanne Malherbe, buried her in the cemetery of the church in St. Brelade’s Bay. Malherbe lived out her days on the island without her lover and life partner until, at the age of 80, she ended her life.

Notes


3 In particular, one thinks of the object in the Art Institute of Chicago with a hand and eyeball cutting through a cloud. See S. Harris, “Coup d’Oeil,” *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 1 (2001): 89–111. In this object Cahun continues her practice of both drawing on and critiquing Surrealist imagery.


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